**Just a Walk in the Park**

**Summary**

An alternate universe where Melinda May crashes, actually crashes into a little bundle of trouble and can't seem to get the kid out of her mind. She makes a promise she has to keep. Will it just be that, a promise, or will it become something more. And will Mary Sue Poots find what she's been looking for?

**Stats**

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**Notes**

This was just stuck in my head and I had to free it and no I haven't abandoned If the Frame Fits but this was in the way..... If you think it's a waste of time let me know and I'll just shelf it, but if you like there is more itching to get out of my brain and until I free it I am stuck with it....

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| Rating: | General Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | Gen |
| Fandom: | Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (TV) |
| Relationship: | Melinda May and kid Skye/Daisy as Mary Sue Poots |
| Character: | Melinda May, Mary Sue Poots - Character |
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Chapter 1

Melinda May stood waiting for the light to change. She’d had a rotten day that ended with a much needed trip to the grocer. She held a full bag in one hand with a second slung over the opposite shoulder. As her mind reviewed all of the things she could have done differently she did not miss the slight sensation of someone lifting her wallet from her side pocket.

She turned in a heartbeat snatching the skinny wrist, dropped both bags and faced the perp with fist drawn. The crowd moved forward when the light turned, absently kicking her oranges into traffic and trampling the loaf of French bread. Eggs slid across the hot pavement turning white with the summer heat.

May growled several curses under her breath and glared into the eyes of a grubby kid. From the cut of the hair to the hang of the clothing she could not determine the child’s gender, but the kid couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old. She scanned the kid’s hands then looked to the sidewalk, spying her wallet floating in the milk that was glugging out of the small jug she had just purchased. She let out an exasperated breath. 

“Lemmee go!” The kid shrieked. Then turned and squawked to the crowd. “Help, somebody help. This lady’s try-na kidnap me!” Yanking mightily the kid tried to pull free and smiled as an older woman stepped toward them.

“What’s going on here?” The lady demanded.

May spun her hand around the kid’s wrist and pulled her closer. “Nothing you need to be concerned with,” she spoke in her sweetest voice. “Just a little spill and the kid thinks I’m angry. We’re having a really bad day and now this.” She spread her hand across the mess on the sidewalk. “I guess it’ll be McDonald’s for supper tonight.” She smiled at the woman while squeezing the kid’s hand as tightly as she could without snapping the little fingers she could feel in her palm.

The child took the hint and pressed her lips together although Melinda would always believe it was because of her vice-like grip leaving the kid speechless. The woman eyed both of them suspiciously and Melinda smiled again. Other passersby were starting to pay a bit more attention. She let out a frustrated breath and pulled the kid in front of her.

“Okay, okay…I was angry and shouldn’t have yelled at the kid but it’s been rough. Raising a kid alone and no day care and I had to drag the little one to work with me and today was just…” She let a fake tear roll over her cheek and a sob escape her throat. “It just got to me…and now all the groceries and…”
“Oh dear, I am so sorry,” the woman started apologizing. “I know how hard it can be. I raised three of my own with a husband and it was so difficult on a fixed budget. I can’t imagine doing it alone.” She put a hand on Melinda’s shoulder and patted gently. Some people began salvaging what they could and stuffing it back in the bags that lay on the sidewalk. A grumbling man stuffed a twenty dollar bill in Melinda’s hand and the woman added ten more to that, apologizing that she didn’t have more. Melinda protested but the crowd continued ‘helping’ while she kept a firm grip on the little trouble-maker’s hand. It felt like hours but in a few minutes half of Melinda’s groceries were back in the bag and she held a wad of cash in her hand. Waiting until she was sure all of the do-gooders were dispersed she let out a low growl and dragged the kid across the intersection.

Melinda stormed down the street yanking her little despot behind until she turned into a small park and slammed the urchin onto a bench. “What the hell is the matter with you kid? I should kick your ass all over this park and back to wherever the hell you came from.” She had released the kid’s hand and now paced back and forth in front of the bench. The child massaged the aching fingers then made to make a dash but Melinda was faster, grabbed the kid’s collar and flung him or her back onto the bench. She poked a finger a few inches from the kid’s nose. “Do not make me chase you.” She commanded then stood back and exhaled loudly. She looked away and took several breaths, crossed her arms over her chest and tapped one foot.

The kid didn’t cry or back down, simply backed into the bench and glared right back at the incensed woman. “I wasn’t gonna keep it,” a little growl shot up at Melinda. “I just wannit a look.”

“A look?” She narrowed one eye. “A look? You tried to steal my wallet just to look at it? What kind of a stupid excuse is that? That’s all you’ve got? Damn it, kid you are the worst thief I ever met!” If Melinda May laughed, this would have been one of the rare times but as it was she was way too angry.

“I ain’t no damn thief!” The little voice spat, wrapping little knuckles around the edge of the seat. “I wanna na see yer name, that’s all. I wooda gave it back, just told ya ya dropped it er suttin.”

“What the hell, kid? Did you ever think of just asking? Is that too difficult?” May barked back, then stopped. “My name, huh? And my address, oh I have your number kid. All sweet and innocent and then your gang breaks in to my house and takes what they want.” She nodded.

This time the kid stood with little fists clenched on both sides. “I said I ain’t no damn thief and I don’t not no damn gang and I don’t give a big fat damn what you think!” The oversized baseball cap slid off the kid’s head allowing the dark hair to spill down around her shoulders revealing for the first time that Melinda was dealing with a feisty little girl who stood jutting out her chest and breathing rapidly.
Melinda poked the kid’s shoulder effectively knocking the skinny little thing back to the seat. “Do you know how much you cost me in groceries, not to mention time?”

The little girl looked at the bags on the ground next to the bench. “You got most of ‘em back, cept the eggs and milk and the other stuff that spilt. ‘Sides them people gave you enough money to buy twice more than ya dropped.” She leaned forward and narrowed her eyes. “And I din’t spill yer stuff, you did when ya tried to break my hand.”

Melinda leaned forward as well, again poking the kid back against the seat. “If I wanted your hand broken you’d be picking your grubby little fingers up with my groceries.” She spoke through her teeth and for the first time saw fear in the little girl’s eyes. She stood back and let out a frustrated breath then stared into the distance.

After a few minutes of silence she looked back at the kid. “So whadya gonna do with me? Ya gonna hit me?” The kid demanded, unconcerned with the consequences.

“What? No…of course not. Hit you? What…why would I…Why would you even think I would hit you?” Melinda scrunched up her face thinking that the kid would even fathom she’d do such a thing.

The girl shrugged. “I dunno. Cuz that’s what people do when they’re all mad and yellin’ at ya. They hit ya sometimes with just their hand but sometimes with a belt or a stick or wooden thing.”

Melinda let out a long cleansing breath and looked into the dark almond shaped eyes. “Is someone hurting you kid?”

The little girl shook her head but avoided eye contact. “Not now,” she mumbled as she swung her feet that did not quite reach the ground. “I got hit lotsa times but not now.” The little girl said a little louder, avoiding further explanation.

Melinda shook her head. “In your home?”

Again a nonverbal head shake with no eye contact.

“You live on the street, kid?” Melinda asked quietly as she sat down next to the little girl who scooted away quickly.
Another head shake.

Melinda let out a breath. “Well, I can’t just leave you here so either you tell me where you live or I call the police.”

“No, no don’t!” the little girl almost pleaded. “I’ll get in so much trouble.” She looked up at Melinda and shook her head rapidly. “It ain’t far. I can go home myself. You don’t hafta take me.”

Melinda pursed her lips and shook her head. “I think I do. I need to make sure you’re safe.”

“It’s real safe.” The kid nodded.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Melinda announced as she stood and stuffed one of the grocery bags into the other then hefted it on to her shoulder. She held out a hand and waited a few seconds for the child to take it. “I’ll be gentle unless you give me reason not to be.”

The child sighed, stood and took the offered hand then waited.

Melinda raised one brow. “Well?” She swiped the other hand out in front of them. “Lead the way.”

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The child led Melinda through the park and down three blocks before turning on a side street and through a rather seedy alley. For a moment she thought the kid was leading her on a wild goose chase but they exited the court to a shady street that they crossed and moved around the corner. A very large church loomed in front of them and took up most of the block. The kid skirted around the large building through a narrow passage into a courtyard and around another large brick building. She pushed open an iron gate and turned down the block then up the stairs of the same building and pushed open the very large double door. A chime sounded as they stepped into the foyer and the kid flipped her dirty sneakers off into a pile of various sized shoes.

“Mary Sue,” a tall woman in a dark skirt and plain blue blouse sighed with what sounded like relief. “Where have you been so long? You are never out this late and look at you.” She shook her head. “You’ve missed supper.”
The little girl hung her head and took a few breaths.

Melinda watched the exchange then spoke. She still held the child’s hand. “She got a little turned around and ended up colliding with me. She helped pick up my groceries and we just lost track of time.”

The little girl’s eye brows went up and down very quickly as she looked up at May and then gave the other woman a quick nod.

The woman looked at Melinda with a genuine smile. “Why thank you, Miss?” She held out a hand in greeting.

“May,” Melinda smiled back as she dropped the little hand and reached for the other. “Just May.” The older woman took her hand and patted it gently then turned to the little girl.

“Well, you are a sight little one. Best you go upstairs and wash then see Sr. Michalene. She’s kept something warm for you.” The woman smiled.

The child took a few steps then stopped and looked back at Melinda. “Go kid, before you miss supper all together and don’t think I won’t be keeping an eye on you.” She warned with a steely glare.

The child smiled, turned and ran up the stairs. Melinda could here her footsteps thumping down the hall above.

The slender woman clasped her hands together and turned back to Melinda. “I’m sorry. I’m Sr. Stephanie and I thank you for bringing our intrepid Mary Sue back to us.”

Melinda looked around the large foyer and listened to the hum of children’s voices coming from a room down the hall. “What is this place?” She wondered out loud.

“I’m so sorry dear, I thought you knew. This is St. Agnes’ Orphanage.” The woman smiled.

“Orphanage?” Melinda again spoke her thoughts. It didn’t look like any orphanage she’d ever seen,
well she hadn’t see that many and most were in the rather third world countries of the world. As far as domestic foundling homes…well, she’d never had reason to be inside one. She just pictured a bunch of grubby kids in a dirty building mostly fending for themselves. This place was nothing like that. It was well kept, clean and smelled like something more than supper had been cooking. In fact it smelled a lot like chocolate chip cookies. The voices she heard were calm and there were hints of laughter mixed with it. The walls were plastered with kid art in real frames and this woman seemed genuine in her concern.

“Mary Sue didn’t tell you.” It was a statement, not a question and from the look on the woman’s face it probably wasn’t the first time. “She is quite a handful.”

“She’s an orphan?” Melinda asked as the woman held out a hand and invited her into a small parlor off the foyer.

“One of what we call our lifers.” The sister sighed. “She’s been to a few foster homes but it never seems to work.” She paused and looked toward the stairs as if she was waiting for the child to appear there. “Sometimes I actually think she has herself sent back on purpose.” She shook her head, sighed and looked back to Melinda who looked quite perplexed. “Oh, our Mary Sue has it in her head if she spends enough time on the street that her parents will recognize her and they will be reunited. She feels they lost her somehow and are searching the same streets she does.”

May nodded, suddenly realizing why the kid wanted to see her name. “And is that how she came to be here?”

Sr. Stephanie frowned and shook her head. “Sadly, no. She was left in the Safe Haven crib inside our parish church. The outer doors are kept open at night. The sacristan found her in the morning when he came to prepare for early Mass. She must have been there all night. The hospital said she could not have been more than a few days old. It was about three months before she came back to us. She had some serious health issues that kept her hospitalized for quite some time.” The woman explained.

Melinda nodded her understanding.

“I really hope she didn’t caused too much trouble.” The nun almost laughed. “It seems to follow her like a hungry puppy.”

“No,” Melinda smiled as she stood from the seat the nun had escorted her to when they entered the room.
“Well, thank you again for getting her back. We will try to keep her on campus but she doesn’t usually venture very far and she is always home for supper…well, except for today.”

Melinda nodded again as she headed for the door with the nun walking slowly behind. She put a hand in her pocket and felt the wad of cash she’d stuffed there. She pulled it out and stared at it for a moment. “I…I’d like to make a donation to the church or parish or even the kids.” She held the cash out the nun.

“Why thank you, Miss May.” Sr. Stephanie was surprised. “That is very generous.” He smile faded into a frown as she let out a soft sigh. “I do wish you hadn’t told Mary Sue you would be watching her. It will get her hopes up. She takes everyone at their word and ends up getting hurt so very often. I’m afraid that little one will expect you to keep your word.”

Melinda pulled open the door and turned back to the nun. She looked over the woman’s shoulder at the staircase where the little girl disappeared. “I always keep my word.” She smiled as she stepped out and pulled the door closed.

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Mary Sue sat at the top of the concrete stairs in front of St. Agnes’ occasionally rising and skipping down to the sidewalk to glance in both directions. Sr. Stephanie watched from her office and sighed at the fact the little girl was in for a big disappointment. Today was the first day in as long as the nun could remember that Mary Sue wasn’t patrolling the neighborhood in search of her parents. She truly meant to sit the little girl down and have a long talk about that, but could not bring herself to shatter the child’s hope that those people were out there looking for her just as she searched for them. Truth was that Mary Sue’s parents were long gone in a dark car that squealed away from the curb swiping three other cars as it motored down the street. It was the noise that brought the sisters to the church that morning, afraid there had been a horrid accident. Outside the large wooden doors they found the tiny baby, barely alive, wrapped in a newspaper on the church steps. She was no more than a few hours old. Sr. Stephanie rode in the ambulance cradling the bluish infant, praying for a miracle.

Three days later the police found the car that tore away from the church, a burnt out shell left in a field miles from nowhere. That’s were the trail ended. Fire burns away everything including every trace of anything that might have been in that vehicle. No human remains were found in or out of the car and in all the years Mary Sue had been at St. Agnes no one had ever inquired about her. That in itself would be devastating to the little girl who dreamed of a mother just as desperate as she was to be found.
Now she watched as Mary Sue sat on the steps with her chin in her hands and kicked at the gravel that had somehow collected there. She put down the files she held, stood and headed outside, stopped only when the ancient phone on her desk rang its old fashioned tone.

“St. Agnes,” she answered, moving the light curtain aside to watch the little girl outside. She hoped it would be something easy to take care of, yes, quick and easy.

“Hello, Sr. Stephanie,” Melinda May’s voice came from the other end of the line. “I am sorry for calling so late but it’s been a wild day. Is it possible to speak to Mary Sue?”

“Miss May,” the nun could not help smiling. “I didn’t…I wasn’t expecting your call.”

“Just May,” Melinda reminded the Sister. “I told you I didn’t make empty promises.” There was a pause. “She’s not out roaming the streets.” It should have been a question, but Melinda May simply stated facts.

Sr. Stephanie laughed. “No, no May. She’s here. Hold please, while I collect her.” She turned as one of the children passed the door, placed a hand over the speaker end of the old telephone receiver and called to the girl. “Polly dear, would you please send Mary Sue to me? She’s out on the front steps.” She smiled at the girl who smiled back.

“Sure Sister, no problem…” the girl took a few steps away from the door and grumbled under her breath. “Of course, I will cuz I wasn’t doing anything important and now I gotta go fetch Poops off the steps.”

She marched to the large front door and yanked it open. “Hey, pooper scooper, what’d ya do now?” She sneered at the younger girl who did not turn around.

“Bug off, Polly.” Mary Sue grumbled. “I’m busy.”

Polly slid out the door and across the wide porch. She stood behind the little girl and knocked the back of Mary Sue’s head with her knee. “Well yer in trouble for somethin cuz Sister Steff wants you right now.” She knocked the girl’s head twice again on the last two words.

“Knock it off,” Mary Sue growled as she put one hand to her head and swung out with the other.
Polly jumped back and away with a laugh. “Ooooo, whatcha gonna do, Suzy Q?” The girl bounced from foot to foot and motioned with both hands for the little girl to step forward. “Come on, Mary Sue, show me what you can do?” She sung to the tune of that Peggy Sue¹ song that Mary hated because Polly always found some stupid thing to rhyme with her name and sing it to that same stupid tune.

Mary Sue stood up with both hands clenched into little fists. Polly put both her hands to her head and wagged them at the child, stuck out her tongue, turned and leapt over the porch rail. She turned as she bounced on the grass. “You better get to that office before them come lookin fer ya, Sue-poopy.” Again she fell into a fit of laughter as she disappeared around the side of the building.

The little girl watched, breathing heavily as she clenched and unclenched her hands at her sides. One of these days she was going to sock that jerk. But not today, today she was going to keep her promise. She took one last long breath, let it out and turned toward the still opened door. Shutting it carefully, Mary Sue dragged herself to the office and stood in the doorway when she noticed Sr. Stephanie was on the telephone. She smiled at the little girl and motioned for her to come in and before Mary Sue could sit the nun shook her head.

“Here she is. I don’t know what took so long.” She smiled into the phone then held it out to the little girl.

Mary Sue just stared. She’d been called into this office for many things, some she was guilty of and some she just took the blame for because it was just easier than trying to convince anyone she didn’t do it. But never, ever had she been handed the telephone.

Sr. Stephanie took the little girl’s hand and pressed the receiver into it then lifted to her ear. “It’s okay, sweetheart. It’s for you.”

“Me?” Mary Sue was still in disbelief, even though Sr. Stephanie was still smiling and nodding at her.

“Hey kid!” The voice on the phone caused the child to jump. She turned and looked at it as if it spoke on its own. “Kid, are you there?”

“Hello?” Mary Sue spoke softly into the heavy receiver cradling the mouth piece with one hand and gripping the heavy item with the other.
“Hey, kid.” May’s voice smiled. “Keeping yourself out of trouble?”

Mary Sue thought about the almost-incident with Polly. “Most of the time,” she mumbled.

“Well, you’re trying and that’s a start.” May assured her.

Mary Sue smiled and nodded her head.

“She can’t hear you nod, darling. You have to talk.” Sr. Stephanie whispered around a soft smile.

“I’m trying.” Mary Sue said quickly.

“No wandering around town by yourself today?” May asked.

Mary Sue shook her head then added a quick, “No.” She thought for a moment then added. “I waited for you.”

May was quiet for a second. “You know I have to work, kid. I can’t come by everyday but I will call whenever I can. That might not be everyday either, but you better believe I’ve got my eye on you.”

The little girl smiled. No one ever said that to her before, not like that anyway. It wasn’t a threat, it was just something the woman promised.

“So, you have any plans for Saturday?” May asked, just like that.

“Saturday?” Mary Sue repeated mentally counting the days til the weekend.

“Yep, Saturday. I thought, if was okay with Sr. Stephanie, we could spend some time together. You could help me do some grocery shopping.” May continued.
Mary Sue felt the flush on her face. “I’m really sorry about your food. I got sixty-two cents in my band-aid box. You can have it.”

“We’ll talk,” May told her. “How about you give the phone to Sr. Stephanie and I’ll ask about Saturday? One condition, you have to stay out of trouble all week. Deal?”

“Deal!” Mary Sue nodded as she held the phone out to the nun who sat in a large chair next to her. “She wants to ask you something.”

Sr. Stephanie nodded and took the phone, covering the mouthpiece again with one hand. “Maybe you should have a seat in the hallway until I’m finished.” She watched as the grin fell from the little girl’s face. “Don’t worry, if May wants to speak with you again, I will let you know.”

Mary Sue hung her head and managed a pout as she moved to the doorway. She stopped and looked back at the nun who smiled and waved her hand toward the hallway. “And close the door, sweetheart.” The little girl’s pout doubled as she pulled the door shut and dropped onto the bench outside the Sister’s office.

Sr. Stephanie smiled at the child’s dramatics then returned to the call. “Thank you so much for calling May. She has a lot of faith in you. I surely hope you do not break her heart.”

“I have no intention of hurting her, Sister.” May assured the nun. “I’d like to spend some time with her, maybe this Saturday, if that’s possible. I can provide references and required clearances if you need them. Just give me your address and I will email them today.”

Sr. Stephanie gave a small laugh. “Unfortunately we at St. Agnes have yet to join the technology generation. We do not seem to have the means and the Sisters are much too old to dabble in learning new ways. Pen and paper is still our way of keeping records.”

“That is not a problem, Sister. I can drop them off tomorrow evening.” May promised.

“I am not so sure it is a good idea, May.” The Sister sounded doubtful. “What exactly are your intentions?”
“Intentions?” May was a tad confused. “I’m not quite sure what you mean. I have no intentions.”

The nun let out a little breath before continuing. “Our mission is to find loving homes for the children in our care, May. Mary Sue is a difficult placement but I do pray that there is a family for her. She so needs to be wanted, to be loved.”

May was taken back for a second. Was this nun suggesting she take this little imp on a permanent basis? She was only trying to keep the kid out of trouble, to convince her it was safer to stay off the streets. That didn’t mean she was planning on some kind of road to motherhood. Sure she liked the kid. She had spunk. Truth was Mary Sue was a real spitfire, full of piss and vinegar and she reminded May so much of herself all those years ago. It wasn’t only the girl’s temperament, but that loss, that longing for companionship. Melinda May recognized that having lost her own mother at a very young age, not to some cruel accident or dreadful illness but to the woman’s dedication to her career rather than her child. May told herself she forgave her mother, but deep somewhere in her well organized compartmentalized mind she knew she still resented it. Maybe that’s what Mary Sue touched.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

But, she made a commitment, and Melinda May kept her word.

“I’m just trying to be her friend, Sr. Stephanie. Every kid needs a friend.” May explained.

“Yes,” the nun agreed, “every child needs other children to play with and learn to socialize and work their way through the world.”

May sighed. “Okay, I used the wrong word…a mentor. Tell me Mary Sue doesn’t need a mentor, someone to point her in the right direction.”

The nun couldn’t help smiling. “Well, I must admit she has behaved herself today…all day…and that in itself is a major accomplishment. I suppose if you can help her perhaps ‘turn around’ it might be easier to find placement for her.”

“I’m not looking to change the kid.” May retorted. “But maybe I can show her how to channel all that chutzpah.”
Sister Stephanie couldn’t help laughing. “Is that what you call it? Some of the Sisters have much less endearing terms for our Mary Sue’s behavior.”

“So, that’s a yes.” May stated.

“I still think it may not be a good idea, but because she is so excited already I cannot deny her.” Sr. Stephanie sighed.

“Excellent,” May replied. “I’ll be there by eight. That’s not too early, I hope.”

“Not at all, the children are up by seven every morning.” The nun assured her.

May frowned as a chime on her phone alerted her to incoming call. “I have to go, Sister, tell Mary Sue I will call to say goodnight by eight thirty.” She didn’t wait for a goodbye before disconnecting the call and taking the second.

Sr. Stephanie did say good bye then realized she was talking to air. She smiled at the receiver then laid it gently in the cradle of the old phone on her desk.

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“Mary Sue, I will not ask you again. It is well past time you should be in bed and lights out is less than five minutes away.” A small, stout, elderly Sister scolded the little girl who sat on the step with her arms wrapped around the large post at the bottom of the railing. “And you’ve got Kitty here joining in your mischief as well. Now, both of you off to bed.” She clapped her hands together several times and nodded toward the top of the stairs.

Mary Sue wrapped her fingers together on the other side of the pole and pressed her cheek against it. “You can go Kitty. Don’t get in trouble.” The little girl said without taking her eyes of the black phone that set on a small table across the large hallway.

The other little girl who was no more than a year or so older, shook her head and placed a hand on Mary Sue’s shoulder. “I’m not afraid, Mary Sue. I said I’d stay with you.” She looked up at the nun who now stood tapping one foot with her arms folded over her chest.
Kitty glanced quickly at the large grandfather clock in the corner of the foyer. Its loud ticking seemed in time with Sr. Margaret’s tapping or maybe she just tapped to the clock’s time. The clock issued a loud tock as the minute hand jumped ahead…eight twenty-seven. The older girl jumped slightly and looked up at the nun again. The woman scowled back.

“Kitty, go to your room. Mary Sue is once again pushing her limits and mine.” Sr. Margaret spoke to Kitty but glared at the little girl set on staying put.

“She just wants to say good night, Sister.” Kitty pleaded her friend’s case. “She isn’t trying to be bad. She just knows she can’t leave yet.”

The large clock tocked again…eight twenty-eight.

“Just one more minute, please Sister.” Kitty begged. “I’ll go, but let Mary Sue wait just one more minute.”

“I am sorry, girls but rules are rules and both of you should be in bed right now. I cannot make exceptions. What if everyone asked to be up one more minute? It would take all night to get the lot of you to bed. Now unless you want punishments tomorrow, I suggest both of you get up those stairs right now.” She pointed up the stairs. “I do not want to disturb Sr. Stephanie.”

Kitty stood and pulled her pale pink robe around her. She tugged on her friend’s arm. “Come on, Mary Sue we waited but sometimes people just don’t mean it. Come on, you don’t wanna be in trouble, do you?”

Mary Sue shook her head and blinked away a tear that threatened to fall. She hugged the post tighter and pulled away from Kitty, holding her breath as she watched the second hand spin the face of the clock and swallowed hard when it tocked away another minute.

Kitty stood, turned and took a step, paused and looked back once before slowly climbing four more. She turned to coax her friend one last time when the loud claxon of the phone’s bell shattered the silence of the large building. Mary Sue shot away from the bottom step as if she’d been roughly pushed, almost tripping over her much too long faded robe. Sr. Margaret grabbed the little girl’s arm preventing the fall and stopping her from reaching the ancient telephone first.

“Good evening…St. Agnes…how may I help you?” Sr. Margaret answered in her most professional tone, still holding tightly to the little girl who stood looking up at her. “I see, well it is rather late,
ma’am and all of the children are…” she glared down at Mary Sue, “or should be in their beds. This is a highly unusual request and I cannot take a child from their rest.”

Mary Sue struggled and threatened to let out a yell then remembered her promise to behave herself all week. It was difficult. She let out a little growl but remained quiet.

“I understand that promises are very important, ma’am, but so are rules and we do have rules here that everyone must follow.” She gave the girl a little shake just to let her know that was meant for her, too. Sr. Margaret was quiet for a few moments, clearly listening to a long explanation. Her mouth dropped open just bit and she shook her head.

“She can’t hear you if you don’t speak into the phone.” Mary Sue whispered with a little smile.

Sr. Margaret scowled her most fierce scowl and then gave the girl another shake. “No, no ma’am I don’t think that is necessary. Sr. Stephanie is in meditation right now. I do not wish to disturb her. I am sure I can take care of this.” She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes before holding the heavy black receiver out to the little girl, but pulled her close before she had a chance to take it. “Five minutes, missy, no more.” She whispered her warning.

Mary Sue nodded and took the phone, shaking off the nun’s grasp on her arm. “Hello,” she spoke quietly, trying to calm her excitement but failing miserably.

“Hey, kid,” May’s voice smiled back. “Hope I didn’t get you in trouble. Pretty busy here, I just got home.”

Mary Sue looked to Sr. Margaret who stood just a foot away, with her arms over her chest, glaring back. She shook her head and smiled.

“Nope, it’s okay. I knew you would call, but I can’t talk for a long time. It’s past light’s out.”

“Right,” May agreed. “And time you were in bed, so I’ll say good night, wǎn‘ān.” She smiled.

“Wan on,” Mary Sue repeated. “Is that good night?”
“It is.” May told her. “Now, get to bed and go to sleep. Tomorrow looks real busy, kid, so I might not talk to you until Thursday, but you keep yourself out of trouble. Got it?”

“Got it,” Mary Sue nodded. “Good night, May.” She smiled broadly.

“Sweet dreams, bao bao.” May whispered at the click of the call disconnecting.

Mary Sue turned to Sr. Margaret as she hung up the phone. “Thank you, Sister.” She smiled as she ran for the stairs. She gathered the bulky robe around her middle and raced halfway to the top before turning back with one hand on the railing.

“Wan on, Sr. Margaret!” She took three more steps. “That means good night!” She smiled before hopping to the landing and dashing up the second flight of stairs.

The little girl hurried down the hall to the last door and pushed it open. She flew across the room and jumped into her small bed, pulling the covers around her before realizing she hadn’t shed her robe. She stood on the saggy mattress and wriggled out of it, dropped it to the floor and dove back under the blanket then bounced herself into a comfortable position.

“I knew she’d call.” She whispered to the little girl in the next bed.

“I’m glad she did.” Kitty yawned. “Good night, Mary Sue.”

“Wan on,” Mary Sue smiled. She continued smiling at the ceiling until she could no longer hold her eyes open.

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Mary Sue was up and dressed before Sr. Margaret had a chance to roust the little girl’s from their beds. She pulled on her one size too big jeans and quickly tied her broken shoe lace back together before struggling to make a bow with the very short remainder. She skipped to the bathroom and washed her face then remembered to brush her hair and snap one small, pink plastic barrette over the strands that fell in her eyes and caused the Sisters to constantly remind her to brush it aside. She frowned at the stain on her faded blue and white t-shirt and wondered if coloring it with one of the markers in the art room might make it look better. She promised herself she’d try later. A few minutes later she slowly opened the bathroom door and peeked up and down the hall. She slipped
out and hurried to the stairs, quickly and lightly scurrying down before the dreaded Polly crossed her path.

The little girl didn’t even realize she’d been holding her breath until her foot hit the ground floor and she exhaled with a long sigh. The last thing she needed was that big jerk giving her a hard time. She only had two more days to behave and it would be Saturday. She came pretty close to socking putrid Polly yesterday and she wasn’t sure she could do it again. Two weeks ago she sunk her teeth into the beast’s forearm when she tried to put her in a headlock. It left a nasty bruise and Sr. Regina didn’t think twice about using her paddle about ten times, but Mary Sue didn’t cry. She wouldn’t give dopey Polly the satisfaction. Sr. Stephanie took old Polly to the doctor and she came back all weepy because she had to have a tetanus shot. Mary Sue couldn’t help laughing even though she had two days to sit alone in Sr. Regina’s office writing punishment assignments.

The third day Polly stopped her just outside the bathroom and punched her in the tummy so hard that she threw up four times. Mary Sue was no snitch, she didn’t say a word about the big bully even after vomiting all over the older girl’s feet. Sr. Stephanie sat with her in the infirmary. She even gave her sips of cold ginger ale and those little white crackers only the Sister’s got on their table. It was great because she wasn’t really sick. Sister read her stories and played games with her, just her. Mary Sue liked Sr. Stephanie and she was pretty sure Sr. Stephanie liked her.

“Hey, Poops…”

Mary Sue froze halfway across the common room. She felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. Pukey Polly was already up and waiting for her. She stopped but did not turn to face the older girl.

“Where ya goin’ so early, Mary Suzy?” Polly sneered as she leaned against the wide doorway between the kids common area and the large foyer. “Off to pinch some extra goodies from Sr. Jeremy’s kitchen. She says those cookies she made for the bake sale at the church have been disappearing every morning.” The girl laughed as she bit and chewed loudly.

Mary Sue closed her eyes and pulled her hands into tight fists. She took quick little breaths through puffed cheeks.

“Maybe I’ll just sound the alarm and let her know how I caught you red handed.” The girl’s voice got louder as she approached and circled the smaller child stopping directly in front of her. “Just look at the mess you made,” she nodded toward the cookies she squashed with one foot into the carpet in front of Mary Sue then pushed a third cookie into the little girl’s chest, twisting and turning it until it too crumbled leaving chocolate and crumbs ground into her shirt.
“I never touched them cookies!” Mary Sue could take no more.

Polly just smiled. “Oh, but Soupy Poop, you got ‘em all over you.” She remarked in a whiney sing-song.

“You did that, ya big jerk.” The little girl barked back.

“And who do you think Sr. Regina is gonna believe, Poops?” Polly glared at the smaller girl.

Polly never got caught. She blamed everyone for everything she did. She was sneaky and then turned all innocent and sweet talked the nuns into believing all she said. They always believed her because ‘why would she lie about such a thing?’

“I don’t care!” Mary Sue shrieked.

Polly laughed a quiet mean laugh as she turned and took a few steps toward the kitchen. “A little birdie told me there’s some dopey broad that wants to take you out for a day.” She turned her eyes toward the ceiling and hummed a little tune pretending to think for moment. “And that same do-do told me you gotta be a good little pooper all week so you can go…” She poked the smaller girl in the chest hard enough to knock her off balance. “I’m not so sure about that plan…are you, suey poo poo?”

Mary Sue glared back, refusing to answer.

Polly’s smile turned into a growl. “You think you’re better than the rest of us, moo shoo poo?” She pushed the girl hard. “You think you should get some fun day in the park while the rest of us are stuck here with chores and boredom?” Another hard shove, “you think I’m gonna let that happen?” Polly’s voice fell low and threatening. The final shove knocked Mary Sue to the floor with a crash as the table she tried to grab for support toppled as well dumping a tub of Legos in all directions.

“What in all that’s holy is going on?” Sr. Regina stormed into the room then stopped in awe of the sight that met her. She looked at the rainbow colored cubes scattered across the floor and the two girls in the center.

“Sister!” Polly answered as if she were out of breath. “Sister I am so glad you heard. I tried to stop her but she yanked away and ran right into the table.” She pointed at Mary Sue who sat on the floor
staring up at the nun. “She…she was in the kitchen. I heard the scratching noise and thought it might be that big old rat but there she was with her hand in Sr. Jeremy’s cookie tin. I tried to get them back but she dropped them and well…” She spread her hand out toward the crumbs across the carpet. “I don’t know how many she ate before I stopped her.”

Mary Sue jumped to her feet and started for the older girl stopped by Sr. Regina’s grip on her wrist. “You big fat stupid liar! You took those damn cookies! I never even went in the dumb kitchen.”

“Sister,” Polly breathed with a hand on her chest. “When is this little imp every up this early? Why would she be roaming the building except to be into some kind of mischief? We all know she loves those cookies and always bargains for extra. Poor little kid, just needs attention I guess.”

“Who’s been in my kitchen!?” Another voice bellowed from the room behind them a few moments before a very stout nun waddled into the room wielding a wooden spoon. “Who left that mess…cookies all over the floor…” she mumble-grumbled as she shook the weapon at the other occupants of the room.

“I’m so sorry,” Polly almost purred. “I tried to stop her, Sr. Jeremy but she’s just too slippery for me. I’ll help you tidy the kitchen.” The girl held out a hand and stepped toward the nun. “I’ll get the broom and get started. Do you need help replacing what was lost? I’ll help with that as well. It must be so exasperating for you.” She coddled.

“YOU!” Sr. Jeremy stepped closer to the girl struggling to free herself from the first nun’s grip. “You stole from me?” She swung her spoon making contact with the little girl’s hip with each word. “Have you no shame? What is wrong with you? We try to provide for you and this is how you thank us?” The spoon met its mark several more times before the nun let out a loud huff and folded her arms over her large bosom.

Mary Sue took several breaths through her teeth and bit back the tears she would not shed, not for anyone. “I didn’t!” She screamed at the nuns as Polly stood in the doorway wearing a smug grin that the little girl ached to knock down her throat. “I didn’t take your damn cookies. I didn’t even know where the hell they were.”

Sr. Jeremy shook the little girl hard and spun her around before landed a hard smack across her cheek. “You will not speak like that while in this house and you will show respect for the Sisters at all times.” She spun her back toward the other nun who still stood like a fortress wagging her wooden weapon. “You apologize, immediately.”

“I won’t.” Mary Sue growled. “I won’t cuz I’m not sorry.”
Sr. Jeremy shook her again. “How many sins will you commit in one morning, young lady? You’ve stolen and lied about it and now you defy me and show respect for no one.”

Mary Sue yanked valiantly but was no match for the burly nun. “Lemme go!” She snarled, trying to pry the nun’s fingers away from her arm.

“It is barely seven in the morning, Mary Sue and already you have upset the day. You can spend the rest of the day in my office after I once again teach you a lesson you shouldn’t, but have so many times, forgotten.” Sr. Jeremy admonished the child as she dragged her toward the door.

Mary Sue dug her feet into the rug and tugged in the opposite direction as the nun continued to move out of the room. Sr. Jeremy gave a pinch faced nod then turned to Polly who dropped her look of amused satisfaction and pulled a ‘tsk-tsk’ expression into the place as the nun stepped toward her.

“Let’s go dear, we have plenty to do before breakfast.” She edged around the girl who looked toward the opposite door and laughed silently.

¹Peggy Sue, Buddy Holly, 1957, Coral Records, Clovis, New Mexico
Chapter Summary

A bully at St. Agnes makes life difficult for everyone and has Mary Sue lost her chance at a outing with May.
Sr. Stephanie tries to smooth things over and a surprise ‘witness’ reluctantly gives a clue.

Sr. Regina shifted her grip on Mary Sue snagging the back of the little girl’s collar with a handful of hair just to keep her in check. She gave the child a firm shake when she struggled to free herself. “You will calm yourself, young lady. I have had enough of your behavior.” She admonished as she dragged Mary Sue down the wide hallway toward her office at the very end.

“What is going on so early in the morning?” Sr. Stephanie’s voice was calm despite the situation.

Regina shoved Mary Sue in front of her and gave her another little shake. “This one…again. She just cannot stay out of trouble. Polly caught her stealing cookies from Sr. Jeremy’s kitchen. You would not believe the language she used to deny it.” The older woman pursed her lips and spoke in short breaths doing nothing to belie her anger.

Sr. Stephanie interlocked her fingers and rested her hands in front of her. She took a deep breath and looked down at the small child who would not return the gaze. Giving the little girl few seconds to respond, the woman shook her head and let out a soft sigh. She motioned to the other nun to release the child and waited for her to comply. Once Sr. Regina reluctantly let go, Mary Sue shook her clothes back into place and bushed her hair from her face. She felt for the small barrette she’d put there earlier and tried to ignore the small pang of loss when it was not there. She dropped her arms to her sides and stood still, breathing heavily.

“Is this true, Mary Sue?” Sr. Stephanie’s voice was still calm and was not already accusing her but all the child did was shrug her shoulders. The nun put a gentle hand on Mary Sue’s shoulder ignoring the huff of disgust from her colleague. “That isn’t an answer, sweetheart. I need you to tell me the truth, Mary Sue. Were you in the kitchen taking Sr. Jeremy’s cookies?” Sr. Stephanie eyed the brown and chocolate stains on the front of the child’s t-shirt.

Mary Sue kept her eyes to the floor unwilling to see the disappointment in Sr. Stephanie’s. “She don’t believe me anyways.” She mumbled as she turned one thumb toward Sr. Regina.

“I’m asking for me, Mary Sue, not for Sr. Regina. I need you to look at me and tell me the truth.” Sr. Stephanie’s voice stayed the same, without a hint of anger.

Mary Sue shook her head. She knew if she looked up her battle to hold on to those tears would be lost and she just couldn’t cry in front of Sr. Regina. “I din’t steal them cookies, Sister. I din’t go in the kitchen fer nothing, but…” She stopped and took a breath.

The nun waited. Sr. Regina crossed her arms over her chest and tapped one foot on the tile floor. “But, what dear? Tell me.” Her voice was so soft, Mary Sue almost couldn’t hear her over the tap, tap, tap of Sr. Regina’s big black shoe.

“I did say some bad words cuz I was mad at Polly and Sr. Jeremy was hittin’ me with her spoon.
thing.” The little girl shrugged as she quickly mumbled the statement. She drew a quick breath. “I did sweared, Sister and I talked back but I din’t steal nuthin and I ain’t lyin either.” The child’s voice took on an angry tone that she quickly silenced.

“You see, Stephanie, she is still lying, still denying her guilt. I know exactly how to correct that.” Once again Sr. Regina grabbed the little girl’s wrist and yanking her toward the end of the hall.

Sr. Stephanie held up a hand. “I do not see how using your paddle on this child at half past seven in the morning will have any benefit on this situation, Regina. I also don’t think Mary Sue would admit to using bad language and sassing both you and Sr. Jeremy then deny stealing and lying. She knows she will be punished in any case.”

“Absolutely,” Sr. Regina agreed, “and after a few good swats across that little bottom she’ll be more than willing to confess to everything she’s done.” Again, she tugged the little girl a few steps.

“I do not feel that will be necessary, Regina.” Sr. Stephanie smiled. She took Mary Sue’s opposite hand in hers and gave it a soft squeeze. “I want you to go to my office, sweetheart.” She smiled at the little girl who peeked up at her through her straggly hair. “Wait for me there.” She led the child away from Sr. Regina and urged her in the opposite direction. Mary Sue took a few steps then stopped and turned back. “Go ahead, Mary Sue. I’ll be there quickly.” She made a shooing motion with one hand but smiled kindly.

The little girl walked slowly, looking over her should for a few minutes before continuing to the large door at the front of the building. She opened it slowly and stepped inside, peeping at the two nuns who watched her from the dim area near the stairs at the other end of the hall.

“That child needs to be put in her place, Stephanie.” Sr. Regina almost growled. “She is nothing but trouble and you’re ‘spare the rod’ practice is doing her no good. She is out of control and you do nothing to put a stop to it. Some my say you favor the child.” She smiled a not so happy grin. “They might,” Sr. Stephanie agreed. “Yet I do not see how your need to strike an eight-year-old with a wooden bat has done any good at all.” She shook her head, regretting she had been away a few weeks ago when the older nun doled out her brutal punishment. “You left bruises on her that lasted more than a week, Regina. I believe that borders on abuse.”

“That, Stephanie, is discipline. She remembered the lesson every time she sat down for more than a week and she hasn’t bitten anyone since. Has she?” Sr. Regina defended her actions.

“But did you find out what happened exactly before you punished her?” Sr. Stephanie sighed.

“There was no need.” Sr. Regina stammered. “I caught her in the act when Polly was screaming.”

“But you did not know why, did you?” Sr. Stephanie shook her head.

“Why? Did it matter? She was drawing blood, sinking her teeth into that girl’s arm. There is no excuse for that.” The older nun bellowed softly.

Sr. Stephanie let out a soft sigh. “I suppose not, but I still believe your punishment was extreme. Today I will deal with this, but I thank you for your help.”

Sr. Regina let out a huff and threw her arms in the air. “You will regret this Stephanie. That child is nothing but trouble.”

Smiling, Sr. Stephanie gave a smile then turned ant left the other nun mumbling under her breath before she too turned and stormed to her office, closing the door with a small thud.
Sr. Stephanie walked into the common room and stood taking in the scene. The dark crumbly stains of crushed cookie were very apparent on the far side of the carpet. A few Legos lay strewn on the floor near the couch but the bulk of them were back in the large tub on the table against the wall. This drew her attention. When she walked by a few minutes ago almost every Lego was on the carpet or the floor. The large red tub was overturned and lying under the table, certainly not where it was right now. She smiled at the soft sound she heard and stood still listening to the hushed breathing from behind the sofa.

“Couldn’t sleep again, Hiram?” The nun asked softly. “It’s okay, you can come out. They’re all gone.” She waited patiently listening to the sounds of the child deciding his next move. A few minutes later a small boy stood and pushed up the thick glasses on his nose. He shook his too long hair from his face and slowly inched his way around the piece of furniture.

“Thank you for cleaning up the Legos. I know it is a hard job.” Sr. Stephanie smiled.

The little boy smiled shyly and shrugged his shoulders, once again pushing up his glasses. He slid his hands along the stems of the glasses and around the hearing aids on both ears, discretely switching both to the on position.

“I guess they were very loud. Weren’t they?” Sr. Stephanie spoke as well as signed to the little boy.

He nodded.

“I tawned aw. Ooo oud.” Hiram spoke in the speak of one with limited hearing. He rarely spoke at all but was comfortable enough with Sr. Stephanie in the absence of anyone else, to let down his guard.

Sr. Stephanie moved to the couch and sat down patting the spot next to her encouraging Hiram to do the same. He narrowed his eyes for a moment then quickly picked up the last few Legos and put them into the tub before doing as she asked. He sat next to her and she patted his knee as she smiled her thanks for finishing the job.

“Have you been up a long time?” The nun asked.

The boy gave a quick nod and a large smile. It wasn’t unusual to find Hiram in the common room in the early hours of the day. The child did not sleep well. He would wander into the room to read or draw or make elaborate Lego structures before anyone else came to use the space he so loved but was reluctant to share with his peers. During the day, Hiram attended a class at a local school for the Hearing Impaired. This continued through the summer months. He was not totally deaf but enough that it made it difficult to communicate with the others. Hiram was shy and so afraid of being made fun of that he avoided the others even when the nuns assured him they would not give him a hard time. If forced to join the others he would find a spot away from the action and simply observe, refusing to react to anyone. So, after his morning session at ‘school’ the boy would find solace in the church choir loft with his books and a box of his beloved Legos. Sr. Stephanie had no doubt that Hiram, despite his disability, would someday be a gifted architect or perhaps an engineer. She thought very highly of all of her charges and envisioned great futures for each, even that little imp Mary Sue who could not stay out of trouble no matter how many rosaries the nun said for the child.

Hiram stared at Sr. Stephanie, waiting for her to dismiss him. He coughed a little to gain her attention. The nun smiled down at him as she was brought from her thoughts. He smiled back. He did not like to get involved in the antics of the rather boisterous children at St. Agnes and that, in particular, meant Polly Gerard. He kept his distance from the young teen, eyeing her warily whenever they happened to be in the same place at the same time. At first, he’d been timid around Mary Sue as well, but even though the little girl seemed to always in the wrong place at the wrong time she was good natured and friendly toward almost all of the children. She barely noticed Hiram’s
disability until one of the other children pointed it out and even then, just shrugged it off and treated him pretty much the same as she did everyone else. Mary Sue was one of the few children Hiram would sometimes spend time with in the play yard or the common room on a rainy afternoon. Sr. Stephanie wasn’t certain but she believed Mary Sue was sometimes a visitor to the little boy’s haven behind the pipes of the old organ in the choir loft.

“I’m sorry your work was toppled.” The nun frowned as she signed to the child.

“Ah wah ah da.” Hiram spoke as he signed back. “No pa lem.” He smiled.

Sr. Stephanie smiled and then gave a look that concerned the boy. He looked down at his fingers and let out a soft sigh as if he knew what was coming. The nun tapped his shoulder lightly so he would look up at her. When he did she continued speaking and signing simultaneously.

“Did you see what happened earlier?”

Hiram shook his head quickly, his eyes wide with apprehension. Even a hearing-impaired child knew the ramifications of being a snitch, especially when it came to Polly. She’d get back at him somehow. She’d know it was him and he’d pay…. big time. Polly always made you pay big time. He learned that the first week he’d been at St. Agnes. She’d been merciless in her teasing and swiped his hearing aid batteries. He went straight to Sr. Stephanie who made the girl apologize and return them. She also banned the girl from attending a planned movie night that weekend. In return, Polly pounced on him in his bed. Sitting on his chest and socking him twice before he had a chance to even try to get away. She pulled him close and told him next time he might just trip on the stairs or off the curb into the street or maybe she’d just smash a pillow over his face until he turned blue. He never told Sr. Stephanie and never slept well again. And now here she was asking him to tell her what happened. He shook his head again.

“I know you don’t like to get involved in these things Hiram but if you saw anything it would be very helpful to Mary Sue.” Sr. Stephanie smiled. “She is your friend, isn’t she?”

Hiram blinked his blue eyes, magnified greatly behind his thick glasses. He swallowed hard and nodded. He’d skirted behind the sofa as soon as he felt someone nearing the room. He’d been as quiet as death, listening to who might be up as early as he was. The first voice he heard was Polly’s. It sent a shiver down his back, thinking she was up and after him but he realized quickly she was talking to someone else. It was a few minutes before he heard Mary Sue say she didn’t take any cookies. That’s when he peeked under the cloth that covered the old sofa and watched as the taller girl squashed cookies into the rug with her foot. He listened to the altercation between the girls and pulled back behind the couch when it got too loud and then the other two sisters were yelling and it was too much. He turned off his hearing aids, covered his head and hoped for the best. The feeling of all those Legos crashing across the floor brought him back and he’d climbed out and back quickly in order to pick up as many as possible once the room was cleared.

Hiram wasn’t really sure what happened but he knew Mary Sue did not take those cookies. He’d seen Polly sneak into the kitchen almost every morning and exit with more than a handful. She hadn’t seen him in the shadows behind the sofa, but he’d seen her. And this morning he knew she’d been eating when she started speaking to his friend. He felt sorry for Mary Sue. Polly treated her ever worse than she did him. But he was also terrified.

The little boy looked up at Sr. Stephanie and pushed one finger up under his glasses to rub away the tears that blurred his vision. He did not want to lie. That would be a sin and he’d seen what Sr. Jeremy thought of sinners. He knew what Sr. Regina did to the kids she said were sinners. They’d know what he did but so would Polly. Hiram sucked in a quick breath and shook his head quickly signing.
“I went behind the sofa. I did not see what happened. I did not hear.” He pleaded with only a look as his fingers flew in explanation.

Sr. Stephanie took both of those little hands in her own, sighing at the coldness she felt. Hiram’s hands were always cold. She nodded a slight smile at the little boy. “I know you turned off your hearing aid. I know you were frightened.” She brushed his poker straight hair away from his face and patted his knee. “Maybe you should get some breakfast before the van gets here for you.” The nun smiled.

Hiram smiled back as he stood and took a few steps then turned back. He looked over his shoulder and peered quickly down the hall that lead to the kitchen then pressed a small object into the nun’s hand. Again, he signed quickly, abbreviating his statement as he backed toward the exit to the foyer. “MS good girl. Bad words. No sin.” He smiled at the nun who pressed her finger tips to her lips then back toward the child in a sign of thank you. Hiram turned and disappeared down the hall before she could ask another question.

Sr. Stephanie let her palms rest on her knees and smiled at the door where Hiram had disappeared. She knew the child knew more than he would tell. She knew he feared Polly. Most of the children at St. Agnes feared Polly for one reason or another. The girl was cruel in her frightening threats but she was all talk. She’d never really hurt any of the other children just made them think she would, except for Mary Sue. For some reason Polly had no trouble causing the little girl pain, but Mary Sue would say nothing and therefore the nun could do nothing about the situation except keep a close eye on both. This morning was totally unexpected and while she was meditating in the church…well it seemed her prayers had not been answered in a way she’d hoped. Polly’s actions would need to be addressed and it would take time to search her own soul to find a way to do just that. Right now, another child, a much younger and very angry child waited in her office. She’d deal with Mary Sue and then see to Polly.

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Mary Sue climbed into the big red leather chair in the corner of Sr. Stephanie’s office. It was old and soft, full of squiggly crevices and a tiny rip on one arm that had white fuzz poking out like a hairy caterpillar. It smelled like the stuff they burned in the church when it was Benediction only not as strong. That strong smoky smell made the little girl puke all over Sr. Regina when she wouldn’t let her hold her nose. That got her sent outside to sit on the steps all alone but Mary Sue didn’t mind. This smell was softer and made her feel comfortable in the big chair’s embrace. The little girl pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them.

She blinked through the tears that still threatened to fall and picked at the hole in the toe of her sneaker. If she wriggled her toes just right she could pop the little one right through. She thought about Sr. Constance, the nun in charge of making sure all the kids had clothes that almost fit and shoes that didn’t fall off or squish their feet. Sr. Constance had the best laugh in all of St. Agnes and Mary Sue loved telling her stories just to hear it. The older woman almost sounded like a tickled owl with her ‘who, who, who” chuckle. Mary Sue picked at the threads around the growing hole in her shoe and smiled a little at the memory of that laughter. Sr. Constance promised her the next pair of shoes the right size would be hers. People donated clothes and shoes all the time. Most of the stuff the kids wore was donated or the Sisters got it from the second hand shop a few blocks away. They had some kind of deal with the owner and got the stuff really cheap. Once Mary Sue got a sweater that still had store tags on it. It was the first time she ever had something with tags and wore the garment with them attached until they fell off. She never had a pair of shoes that someone hadn’t worn first.

But that was the least of her worries now.
The little girl hugged her legs tighter and rocked slowly, sniffing back sobs that were caught in her throat. She wasn’t afraid of Sr. Stephanie’s chastisement or Sr. Regina’s threat of using that stupid paddle again but the thought of disappointing May…of losing the chance to spend a whole day with her…that was something that made her heart hurt. Mary Sue didn’t know your heart could hurt and she wondered if that was what people meant when they talked about a heart attack. She took a deep breath and shivered the exhale a few seconds before the office door opened.

Sr. Stephanie entered, shut the door quietly and stepped toward her desk. Mary Sue buried her face between her knees and gripped her skinny elbows with the opposite hands as they embraced her knees. She just couldn’t bare to look the nun’s disappointment or to face her own.

“Do you think you can tell me what happened?” The nun’s voice came soft and gentle.

Mary Sue shook her head but did not look up.

“I can’t help you if you won’t talk to me, Mary Sue?” Sr. Stephanie tried again.

“It doesn’t matter,” the little girl mumbled from inside her cocoon.

“Of course, it matters, Mary Sue. I’d like to hear your side.” The nun’s voice was closer and the little girl almost looked up but stopped herself and tried to squeeze farther into the chair. She shook her head again.

“I din’t take them cookies and I din’t squish them either….” She grumbled then took a deep breath and huffed it out. “But I did say bad words and I yelled at the Sisters so it don’t matter what happened. I ruined it. I can’t go now. I can’t be good for nuthin.” Her voice cracked a bit but the little girl still held her tears. She cringed at the light touch on her shoulder.

“You know, Mary Sue, sometimes, even when we least expect it we have a little angel watching over us.” Sr. Stephanie’s voice smiled and the little girl finally peeked up at her. This time Mary Sue looked into the woman’s smiling eyes as she brushed the stray hairs from her face and clipped them back with the little plastic barrette. “I think just maybe, your angel was watching this morning.”

Mary Sue blinked up at the nun, not really sure what she was trying to say. She swallowed hard. “I din’t take them cookies, Sister, I really din’t.” Her voice was almost a whisper as she shook her head repeatedly.

“No, sweetheart, I don’t believe you did. I don’t know what happened but I do believe you Mary Sue.” She patted the back of the little girl’s hand as the child slowly relaxed her grip on her own knees.

The little girl pushed her legs out straight and folded her hands in her lap. “But I still ruined it…” She spoke to her fingers.

“I don’t think you’ve ruined anything, Mary Sue. Sometimes we just react faster than we can think and that might be what happened.” Sr. Stephanie spoke as she moved to face the little girl. She sat on the edge of a wooden chair she’d pulled closer to the big leather one.

“But sayin bad words is bad and I promised to be good and I yelled at the Sisters real loud.” The little girl rubbed a hand over the spoon shaped welts on her arm. “That makes me bad cuz I’m always bad even when I try to not be.”

Sr. Stephanie frowned and gently brushed her fingers over the girl’s arm as well. “Oh, my dear, I think you’ve already paid for that sin.” She shook her head.

Mary Sue shook her head. “May will know I was not being haved.”
“I don’t think she needs to know anything about this cookie incident. I’m not even sure I know everything that happened. Maybe we don’t have to tell her until I do.” The nun pursed her lips and raised her brows in a silent question.

The little girl’s pout was almost comical. “But what about the rest,” she sighed as her shoulder’s drooped in defeat.

“I’m going to leave that up to you, sweetheart. If you want to tell your friend about that I think she will understand, but I still feel you have done your penance.” Sr. Stephanie nodded as she patted the girl’s knee softly.

“Are ya gonna punish me?” The little girl asked as she chewed her lip and looked up over her brows.

“Hmmm…” the nun looked toward the ceiling and tapped one finger on the back of the opposite hand. “I’ve given that some thought and I’m afraid you will have to spend all of today and tomorrow working as my private…oh I think we’ll call it secretary. You,” she pointed toward Mary Sue, “will not leave my sight for the next forty-eight hours and will do everything I say without question. Do you understand that?”

Mary Sue stared as her jaw dropped slightly. She’d had lots of punishments but this was the strangest. She shrugged her shoulders and nodded slowly.

“Very good,” the nun smiled. “First thing… I want you to wash your hands and face and then we will get some breakfast before you accompany me to morning Mass.”

Mary Sue nodded as she stood then scrunched up her face at the thought of spending an hour or more sitting quietly in the church but she gave no argument or disagreement, following Sr. Stephanie toward the small bathroom across from the common room.

xx

Being a secretary for Sr. Stephanie meant licking a lot of envelops and stamps, emptying waste baskets, dusting shelves and sweeping the front steps while she spoke to prospective foster parents on the porch. It also meant an hour in the church after lunch and again after supper as the Sister’s prayed their daily devotions. It really wasn’t too bad. It was quiet and calm and so boring the little girl fell asleep both times.

Polly was called to the office right after afternoon prayers but it seemed secretaries weren’t needed for meetings like that. Sr. Stephanie handed Mary Sue a book and sent her to the bench outside the office with strict instructions to stay there until told to come back into the office. She looked at the book in her hand and understood she was to read while she waited. Polly sneered at her as they passed, sticking out a foot to trip the smaller girl who hopped over it with a grin.

Twenty minutes later the bully stormed out of the office slamming the door behind her. She stormed across the foyer and pounded up the stairs without looking back at Mary Sue or uttering a word that the little girl could understand. She watched until Polly disappeared around the landing at the top of the stairs but heard her banging up the second flight. It wasn’t until bedtime that Mary Sue found out Polly was transferred to the dormitory in the annex building behind the church. Once a girl was sixteen she was usually put in the smaller building, while the boys of the same age went to St. Boniface a few blocks away. Mary Sue didn’t really know why and was sure she’d never find out because she absolutely would find her parents before she had to move there. Polly was only fifteen but Sister made an exception for her and not one of the other kids questioned why. The entire second floor breathed a sigh of relief and even the kids on third seemed more at ease.
When the phone rang at eight-twenty-five, Sr. Stephanie was certain who it was before she answered. Melinda May spoke calmly to the nun asking for the little girl she now made it a point to check on daily. Unfortunately, Mary Sue had fallen asleep almost an hour earlier giving the nun the opportunity to speak to this unusual woman at length, despite the hour.

“I am sorry I missed her, Sister.” May apologized.

“I understand, May.” Sr. Stephanie nodded, feeling odd about calling the woman by merely her surname. “Mary Sue will be very upset that she missed your call but I will tell her in the morning.”

“I’ll be out of town all day tomorrow,” May explained. “I won’t be able to call but I will be there by eight Saturday morning. Did you get the clearances I had one of my associates deliver? Is everything in order?”

Sr. Stephanie shuffled through a stack of envelops on her desk and pulled out one with the name ‘MAY’ in dark block lettering. She slipped it open and scanned the documents inside. Everything seemed to be in order. “Yes, it is all here but I must tell you Miss…I’m sorry, May…this is very unusual. It usually takes months of paperwork and assessments before one of our charges spends any time with a prospective guardian.”

The comment took May back for a moment. Again, she shook off the feeling that this nun thought she was looking to make this arrangement permanent. Crap, the kid needed someone to keep her on the straight and narrow and apparently the ‘fear of the Lord’ was not cutting it. Mary Sue Poots needed a little bit more. Lord, what a name! She thought for the umpteenth time.

“Well, I guess this is an unusual situation, Sister.” May replied. “Like I said before, maybe the kid just needs a mentor, someone to keep her off the streets until you find the family she needs. And really, Sister, Poots? Who comes up with these names?”

Sr. Stephanie couldn’t help the slight chuckle. “Well, even I must admit that is a horrid name and an unfortunate typographical error on one of the older sister’s parts but by the time we discovered it…well, it was too late to change.”

“Too late?” May inquired.

“As I told you before, Mary Sue was quite fragile when we found her. In all honesty we did not think she would be with us very long and the rush to name and baptize the poor little thing was too much for some of us. All of the girl infants are named Mary and given a second name alphabetically. Last names are done in the same fashion, basically by the alphabet and the next name on the list was Post. The Sister in charge of completing documents misread the paperwork or perhaps just scribbled too quickly and it became Poots. We didn’t realize it until she was returned to us and by then it really didn’t matter. Our hopes are that our babies are adopted quickly, giving them new names and identities so these names are temporary at best.” Sr. Stephanie explained.

Now it was May’s turn to chuckle. “Guess the jokes on her then, saddled with that all this time.”

“Oh, we never give up hope, May. Mary Sue is a very special little girl and I am sure the Lord has a special plan for her.” The nun smiled into the receiver.

Again, May got that feeling. It was like an itch that danced all over her body for a split second before completely disappearing. She couldn’t imagine how the nun could do it without making any specific comment. “She’s a good kid, maybe we should all work to keep it that way.”

“Yes, and that is why I am making an exception and allowing this outing. Again, May I do not want
to see Mary Sue hurt and she is so looking forward to this. I hope it is just as important to you.”

“I won’t let her down, Sister.” May stated again. “That’s very important to me.”

The nun smiled again, hearing something more than just words coming from the woman who had somehow found her way into this little girl’s life and it seemed would become much more than a friend or as she put it, a mentor.
Three

Chapter Summary

The day has finally arrived! Mary Sue is up before the sun and... Is May having second thoughts?

Chapter Notes

I apologize this has taken so long. I am taking 12 graduate credits and the work load is astronomical. I just finish one assignment or discussion or video presentation and there is something else due. I'm exhausted most of the time and I wish I could plug my brain into my laptop and just think this story into print. Can't someone please invent that???? One course is finished next week so MAYBE I will have a few minutes to write for fun. Thanks for hanging in there.

Sr. Stephanie looked up from the form she was studying, sure that she'd heard the sound of someone moving in the dormitory above her office. She glanced at the clock – barely five a.m. It wasn’t unusual for the nun to be up at the early hour. She liked to get some of her paperwork done before the children invaded the building with their clatter and chatter. Not that they were a distraction but she felt they needed her attention much more than all of the forms and documents that collected on her desk. It also gave her at least an hour of silent meditation time before attending Mass at seven-thirty.

The children would come streaming down the stairs by seven, some racing, some dragging their feet and others wobbling in varying degrees in between. There were times when one or maybe two made an early appearance, especially on days Sr. Jeremy mixed up a batch of pancakes, but it was a rarity. If someone was up and in motion it was more than likely they were ill or suffering from the nightmares that haunted almost every one of her wards.

The woman set down the forms and pushed herself up from her large desk. She walked through the silent hallway and quietly climbed the stairs as the sound of someone moving around the second floor became more apparent. Opening the first door she peeked inside and counted eight little girls sound asleep in their beds, the second door revealed the same scene. She reached the door at the end of the hall and had no need to push it open as it was already ajar. This was the smallest room on the floor and housed only four of the girls. Right now only three of them were snuggled under their blankets.
Sr. Stephanie turned at the sound of something hitting the floor in the group bathroom across the hall. She smiled knowing she’d have no need to circle the building and check on the boys on the other side. Instead she slowly opened the door to the lavatory and smiled again.

“Mary Sue,” she whispered. “The sun has not even peeked over the horizon. What are you doing up so early, child?” Sr. Stephanie stood in the doorway watching the little girl retrieve the hairbrush that had fallen and slipped behind a shelf full of linens.

“It’s Saturday, Sister.” Mary Sue smiled. “I need to be ready when May gets here. I even took a bath.” She beamed. “I wiped out the tub just like Sr. Sophia told us and hung up all the towels I used.” She nodded toward the large tub then pointed at the towels, neatly hung on the lower racks. For a second she hung her head and mumbled softly. “I wiped up all the water I got on the floor.”

Sr. Stephanie looked in the direction of the tub area and gave a nod of approval. “But, sweetheart it is still more than three hours before Miss May comes for you.”

“It’s just May, Sister.” Mary Sue reminded the nun as she stepped in front of her. “These is my best clothes. Do ya think May will like them?”

“And I think May will love them.”

Mary Sue looked down at her toe that poked through the hole on her left shoe. “Sr. Constance din’t get no shoes that’s my size yet, so I gotta wear these holey ones.” She sighed.

Sr. Stephanie looked down and frowned. She placed a hand on the little girl’s shoulder and grinned. “Well, I suppose there is nothing wrong with being Holy. Now, is there?”

Mary Sue scrunched up her nose, failing to understand the pun. “I got new socks though, just got them yesterday and saved them. Somebody gave us a whole pack!” She gushed. “I got some and Kitty and Racheal and Petey, cuz there was four sets in the little bag.”

“Well, then that is a treasure. Isn’t it?” Sr. Stephanie commented as she urged the little girl into the hallway with a gentle one handed shove. “But it is still way too early to be up, sweet heart. You’ll be falling asleep halfway through your wonderful day. Perhaps you should go back to bed now that you’re all ready.”
Mary Sue stopped and shook her head. “I can’t get back in my bed now, I’m all dressed and I already made it neat like I’m sposed ta.” She took a deep breath. “I can’t sleep no more. I kept tryin but everything is all buzzy inside me.” She wriggled her fingers up and down her sides.

“Oh, my dear, you are excited. That’s all, just so excited about your special day.” The nun assured her.

“I don’t even gotta eat breakfast, Sr. Stephanie, cuz May says we can have pancakes at a real restaurant. I ain’t never been to a real restaurant but I know I gotta use my best manners, just like you tell us at Sunday dinner. I gotta use a napkin and not make any spills. I gotta be real careful. And chew with my mouth closed and no burping.”

The nun covered her mouth to hide the soft chuckle. “I think you are well prepared, Mary Sue. I think you will impress your friend with your Sunday dinner manners.”

Mary Sue returned a broad smile then bounced down the stairs a few steps before Sr. Stephanie who stood for a moment smiling at the child’s joy. The little girl stopped at the bottom and bounced from foot to foot unable to contain her excitement as she waited for the nun to join her. As usual Sr. Stephanie strolled down the stairs at a snail’s pace barely making a sound as her thick black shoes touched on each step. When she finally made it to the dark wood of the first floor she stood and folded her hands in front of her, smiling down at the child who looked up in anticipation.

“Three hours is a dreadfully long time to wait, Mary Sue.” Sr. Stephanie sighed. “It may seem even longer when you are so looking forward to what will happen at that time.”

Mary Sue turned up one side of her face in thought then shook her head. “I don’t think prayin’ will make the time go faster, Sister.”

The tall nun coughed a bit to hide her chuckle. Mary Sue was quick to assume she would make that suggestion. She put a hand to her mouth and nodded.

“Speshly if ya wanna do a rosree, cuz I get mixed up with all the Mary prayers and have to start all over. There’s too many beeds on them things fer little kids.” Again she scrunched up one side of her face and gently shook her head.

“It would take up a great deal of the time you need to spend before May arrives.” Sr. Stephanie suggested, trying to keep the tease from her voice.
Mary Sue frowned for a moment then turned and took a few steps toward the main office. She hung her head and let her arms hang at her sides. Again the nun stifled her urge to laugh at the child’s dramatics and erased the smile from her face as the little girl spun back toward her with a broad smile.

“Maybe I could be yer seckerterry again.” Mary Sue nodded as her hands formed loose fists at her side. “I could empty yer baskets and lick all them stamps before the mailman even gets here. I could even sweep the steps. It aint too dark out there.” She turned and squinted at the black sky out the front door.

Sr. Stephanie knew the little girl’s fear of the dark. “It is a little early for office work, sweet heart and I don’t think the neighbors would appreciate a small girl sweeping before the sun has risen.”

Mary Sue was still staring at the darkness. She shrugged her shoulders. “I won’t make no noise. I won’t even drop the broom.”

The nun stepped beside the girl and put a hand around her shoulders. “I think we can forego the step sweeping for now, dear.” She urged her toward her opened office door. “I believe there are some shelves in my office that could use a bit of attention. Maybe you can empty them and do a bit of dusting.”

The little girl looked up and smiled, nodding her head vigorously. “I could do that, Sister and I won’t break nothin’.”

xx

Across town, Melinda May was also awake. She ran through her early morning workout concentrating on each move, each strike, each breath until she eased into a cool down period and exhaled into her Tai Chi exercise. Again she concentrated on the moves and tranquility of the routine. It wasn’t until the steamy water of her shower brought her thoughts back to the moment that she realized the move she was about to make.

The words…no the tone of that nun made her uneasy. It just seemed that the woman was pushing her toward something she’d never consider. And that kid, that little girl…something about that smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. Something about that kid….
May shook the water from her hair then turned her face into the spray.

What the hell had she gotten herself into? Two weeks ago she stormed through life barely recognizing the fact that people under the age of twenty-five even existed. She’d had absolutely nothing to do with children and the thoughts of spending even an hour with one let alone a whole day.

She stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in her terry robe, scrubbing her hair dry with a soft towel then walked into her room. She’d already laid out clothes for the day, part of her usual routine. Saturday was also full routine. She used the day to do all the normal day to day things she had no time to do during the week. Laundry was usually one of the first things she accomplished. Living alone made that a quick and easy chore, fact was her five year old appliances were still brand new. A trip to the Farmer’s Market was next on her to-do list, just enough fresh fruits and veggies for one to last the week. Afternoon was quiet time, spent catching up on a few books she enjoyed reading, another round of Tai Chi and a run in the park before throwing together a quick dinner. Evenings were spent in her small office completing paperwork she hadn’t gotten to during the week. But, not today…today her routine was upended…today for some unknown reason she’d chosen to spend it with an eight year old pickpocket she’d decided to take under her wing and keep on the straight and narrow.

And that was it…

“I don’t want to see her hurt…”

Sr. Stephanie’s words echoed in her memory as she pulled on her shoes and yanked at the laces. Somehow that statement infuriated her.

Hurt.

Hurt?

May slammed her foot on the carpeted floor and pulled the lace on the opposite shoe with such force it snapped. She let out a incensed breath.

“Hurt her?” May growled to herself. “Does that holy b…” she stopped herself and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

She flipped off the shoe she’d already tied and pulled a pair of plain black sneakers from her closet.
She slid her feet into each and pulled the elastic laces straight then stood and stormed into the kitchen. Breakfast consisted of plain yogurt, a handful of blueberries and a strong tea. She’d promised the kid breakfast at the diner, food she never ate. But, Carl served the best tea and she made it a point to stop for a large cup almost every day. She wondered what Millie, the waitress, would think of her breakfast companion. She wondered how a kid with no guidance and probably no understanding of any kind of manners would act in a public eatery. What the hell was she thinking?

But, she made a promise and Melinda May did not break promises. She gave her word and intended to keep it, regardless of the outcome.

xx

At seven forty-five, Melinda pulled her black SUV into the ten minute parking space in front of St. Agnes. She turned off the engine and took a deep breath before exiting the car and hurrying up the red brick steps. She debated on knocking or ringing the bell at such an early hour, but even through the heavy wooden door she could hear the sound of children.

She rang the bell and waited.

A few seconds passed before an older nun pulled open the large door and smiled at her. “Good morning,” she greeted, almost too happy for early morning visitors. “Please come in dear…” the woman stepped aside and motioned for May to enter. “Have you an appointment?” She grinned as she closed the door.

“Yes,” May answered. “I’m here for Mary Sue.”

The nun’s expression changed to one of confusion as she glanced at the large clock at the end of the hall, then took in the visitor’s appearance. “Oh, my…” she sighed. “What has she done now?” She shook her head and wrung her hands.

May shook her head. This kid didn’t have a chance. No one was on her side, everyone believed the worst. “She hasn’t done anything.” She said through her teeth.

“I see,” the woman nodded. “Perhaps I should summon Sr. Stephanie.”
“Perhaps,” May nodded through a false smile. If she were a cat her back would be arched and every claw would be fully exposed. She swallowed the growl that grew in her throat.

“May,” Sr. Stephanie smiled as she extended her hand, walking from her office.

Melinda had not even seen the other nun walk away. Rage can be that blinding. She let out a quick breath and took the nun’s hand for a moment then let it drop.

“Is everything alright?” The nun asked, suddenly concerned.

‘Damn,’ May inhaled. This woman had some kind of emotional radar. She could read a person from fifty paces. Before she could respond…tell the woman that no everything was not okay and she did not take lightly to everyone in this forsaken place thinking this kid was worthless…the nun continued.

“Oh, May, you haven’t changed your mind. You aren’t here to tell her you have.” She had grabbed May’s hand again and held it between both of her own.

“Of course not,” May almost barked as she pulled her hand away. She decided to drop the concern. It was too early to cause a commotion and Mary Sue did not need to witness it.

For a moment the two women stared at each other before Sr. Stephanie’s smile returned. She turned to one side and extended her arm toward her office door. “She’s been up since before dawn,” she chuckled as she pushed the door open enough for May to peek inside.

Curled into the corner of one of large upholstered chairs was Mary Sue, sound asleep with a feather duster in one hand. May could not help the smile that tickled the corners of her mouth at the sight.

“She lasted until six-thirty.” The nun whispered as she stepped inside and waited for May to join her. “I thought you’d like to wake her.”

May swallowed her reply. What difference did it make who woke the kid? What the hell was this nun up to now? She felt her pulse quicken and took a few calming breaths. She had no idea how to wake up a kid. She thought quickly, forcing herself to look back at her own childhood, something she never did, never wanted to do. She could remember her mother telling her it was her responsibility to wake herself and be ready for whatever needed to be done. She’d given her a small
alarm clock for her fifth birthday and showed her how to set it. That was how Melinda May woke.

Or was it?

She remembered her father’s soft voice calling her name. She remembered him sitting at the edge of her bed and brushing her dark hair from her face. And she remembered snuggling into him before he pulled her into his lap and kissed both of her eyes, telling her it was time to greet the new day.

May smiled and dropped to her haunches in front of the chair. She smiled at the soft countenance of this little girl who seemed to be traveling through the world on her own. This was the face of innocence, not someone who was already the scapegoat for anything and everything that might be wrong. She tentatively reached forward and brushed a single stray hair from the girl’s face. Mary Sue stirred, mumbled a bit and snuggled further into the chair.

“Hey, kid,” May spoke softly as Sr. Stephanie watched. “It’s almost eight. Do you want to have a late start to our day? We’ve got a lot to do.” She waited a moment. “Mary Sue,” she spoke close to the girl’s ear. “It’s time to greet the sunshine.”

The little girl’s eyes squeezed shut tightly, she let out a soft whine and stretched her legs out straight over the arm of the chair before slowly blinking her way awake. She rubbed one eye before realizing where she was or who was with her.

“MAY!” She sat up straight, almost knocking May over in the process. She brushed her sleeve over both eyes as the feather duster slipped to the floor. “I’m ready, May. I’m ready.” She bounced to her feet as May stood, fell back once then stood again. “I’m really ready.”

May nodded. Sr. Stephanie suggested the little girl use the lavatory to ‘freshen up’ a bit before starting her big day. Mary Sue paused for a moment considering how upset either woman would be if she refused then realized she’d better get to the lav before it was too late to find out. She gave a quick nod and headed for the open door.

“Hands and face,” Sr. Stephanie reminded her. The little girl nodded without stopping or turning around. “She needs a lot of reminders.” The nun breathed, as she turned back to May, then walked around her desk and retrieved a small envelop. “I’ve jotted down our doctor’s name and number, just in case. Also an emergency number if you need me. She has no allergies and she’s not a picky eater.” She held the envelop out to May, who took it and slipped it into her jacket pocket. “I expect you’ll have her back by six or seven. We like the children in bed by eight.”

May gave a quick nod.
“Please don’t over indulge her May.” The nun warned. “Gifts and extravagances have to be shared with all of our children. We can’t allow one child to have more than what the others have. It is the cause of many hardships. If something cannot be shared it must be given away and as I said, I do not want to see her hurt.”

May drew a short breath and eyed the nun with a blank expression. “Seriously…do I appear to be…”

“I’m ready.”

Both women turned toward the soft voice in the doorway. May swallowed her comment and was secretly relieved that the little girl had stopped what might have been the argument that kept them apart. She smiled at the child in spite of the situation.

“Then I guess we can go.” May replied then looked at Sr. Stephanie for affirmation. It came with a smile an a curt nod.

May swept a hand toward the hallway indicating Mary Sue should move in that direction. The little girl turned quickly and headed for the door with May a few steps behind.

“Mary Sue…” Sr. Stephanie called as the little girl wrapped both hands around the large brass doorknob.

The child looked back over her shoulder and around May who stood behind her also looking back toward the office door.

“Your jacket, dear. It may be chilly today.” Sr. Stephanie smiled as she held out the garment and waited for the child to retrieve it.

Mary Sue let her hands slide off the doorknob and looked up at May. The woman gave a quick toss of her head and stepped aside to let the little girl pass. She watched as the child walked slowly back and reached for the jacket only to be pulled closer by the nun. May turned the large knob and pulled the door open allowing the early morning sunlight to spill across the dim foyer.
Sr. Stephanie held out the light jacket and helped the little girl slip it on her arms and up over her shoulders. She turned Mary Sue toward her and pulled the coat closed before whispering softly. “Please be a good girl today, dear. Do as your told and stay out of mischief.”

Mary Sue smiled up at the nun. “I prayed to be good, Sister. You say God gives you what you need and I needa be good, so he’s gonna let me. Don’t worry. I got it covered.”

The nun felt the tear form in one eye and bent to quickly kiss the little girl’s forehead. “Yes, you do sweetheart.” She held the child’s face in her hands for a moment before turning her toward the door and shooing her off with a ‘have a wonderful day’.

Mary Sue walked back to the door and took one step over the threshold then stopped, almost causing May to fall over her. She turned and walked back inside her excitement suddenly subdued as she looked at the toes of her shoes and let out a soft sigh.

“What?” May asked, unsure of what else to say. “Did you forget something?”

Mary Sue shook her head but did not look up. May looked over her shoulder to the nun who looked just as confused as she felt.

“I gotta tell ya somethin.” The little girl mumbled into her chest. “Cuz I ain’t gonna lie t’day.”

Now May was more confused. This kid was exasperating. “Okay, spill it.” She almost commanded as she crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow.

“I wasn’t perfect good.” Mary Sue whispered just loud enough for May to hear.

May let out a huff. “Yeah well, nobody’s perfect kid.”

“Ya said I gotta be good all week and I yelled at Sr. Jeremy when she hit me with the spoon thing and I said bad words to Sr. Regina.” Mary Sue looked up with tears in her eyes and spoke so quickly May barely understood.

She looked to Sr. Stephanie who now stood with one hand to her mouth and shook her head slowly.
May sucked in her bottom lip and drew a deep breath before placing her fists on her lips and glaring down at the child.

“It ain’t good ta lie. Sister said I was fendin myself and it was okay fer just once but I promised and you said promises er important.” She returned her gaze to the hole in the toe of her left shoe.

May shook her head and put a hand on the child’s shoulder. “Let’s go kid.” She urged her out the door. “We’ll talk about it.” Turning back to Sr. Stephanie, May shook her head again and turned up one side of her mouth at the nun’s whispered ‘thank you’.

She pulled the door closed and looked at the child still staring at her own feet. “Come on kid, let’s go. We’ve got a lot to do.”

“Aren’t mad at me?” Mary Sue asked tentatively as she slowly followed May down the porch steps.

“I said we’d talk.” May deadpanned as she opened the back door and waited for the child.

Mary Sue stepped to the door and looked up at May’s dark aviator glasses. “Are ya gonna hit me?”

May rolled her eyes and let out a frustrated breath. How many times did she have to tell this kid she was NOT going to strike her. Hell, hit a little kid.

“Get in.” May ordered.

Mary Sue scrunched up her face and complied. May paused for a moment then pushed up the too big sleeves on the little girl’s jacket and examined the oval shaped bruises on both. “Sr. Jeremy?” She asked.

The child looked at the marks and nodded once before easing her arms back and pushing down her sleeves. May let out a sigh of disgust, walked around the vehicle and climbed behind the wheel. She wondered what the penalty would be for knocking a nun on her ass. Instead she took a breath, started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

Sr. Stephanie stood at the door and watched until the black jeep disappeared around the corner at the
end of the street.
May and Mary Sue have their day in the park

May pulled the car into her usual parking place in the underground garage. She pulled the key from the ignition and stepped into the brightly lit concrete structure then rounded the car and opened the back door. Mary Sue looked up at her and paused for only a moment before clicking open the seat belt and untangling herself from the shoulder strap. May sighed and reached in to help. She mentally kicked herself for not thinking to provide the very small child with a safety seat for the day. There had to be somewhere she could get one just for a day or maybe she should purchase one…just in case.

May shook off the thought as she helped Mary Sue step from the car. What the hell, just in case? In case? What…what would she need it for after today? This was a one shot deal, a reward to the kid…fulfilling a promise she made without thinking. Without thinking? She did nothing without thinking, yet this kid had her doing a whole lot of things she would never do.

“Are ya gonna close the door?” Mary Sue stood next to her peering into the car and wondering just what May might be looking at for such a long time.

“Huh?” May replied, shaking off the thoughts once again. “Yeah, yeah…just…just…” She slammed the door a little harder than she planned, causing the child to jump. Letting out another quick breath she turned and nodded toward the elevator at the end of the aisle of cars. “Just…let’s go.” She took a few steps in the direction she had nodded then turned back to see Mary Sue hadn’t moved. She spread her hands in a ‘what?’ question.

“Yer, still mad, huh?” The little girl mumbled.

May stomped one foot forward and cringed as the child pressed herself back against the car. She stopped and forced a smile. “No…no, Mary Sue, I’m not angry…not at you. I’m just upset with myself for…for forgetting something I need. I didn’t mean to scare you.” She took a few more steps and held out her hand.

Mary Sue stared at it for a moment before slipping her own inside. May was surprised at the coldness of the tiny, fragile grasp. She closed her perpetually warm hand around it and smiled a genuine smile as they walked toward the elevator.
Mary Sue walked into the apartment a few steps ahead of May, wide eyed at the view before her. May closed the door and dropped her keys into a small dish on the table just inside. She watched the little girl move down the short hallway and stop at the entrance to the living room.

“Who lives here?” Mary Sue whispered without turning around.

“I do.” May smiled as she stepped around the child and walked left into the kitchen.

Mary Sue watched as May rounded the large refrigerator and disappeared. She heard a door open and close quickly. She moved an inch forward stopping before her sneaker touched the immaculate white rug that covered the living room floor. The little girl had never been in a museum but she’d seen pictures and this looked just like the one Sr. Prudence showed them when they talked about China in social studies class. There was a big blue vase with pictures of warriors and horses painted on the sides and a dragon statue as long as the cabinet it rested on across the room.

“Who else?” The child gulped.

“Else?” May wondered as she folded the large sack she had retrieved from the pantry.

Mary Sue turned toward her and nodded. “Who else lives here?”

May looked at the child for the first time and noticed her wonder and awe. “Just me,” she smiled.

“You got this whole place all for yerself?” The little girl squeaked in surprise.

May shrugged a little and nodded. She wasn’t usually extravagant but it had been her mother’s apartment when she lived in the city and the price was right so she allowed herself this bit of luxury. It was fully decorated and furnished, not to mention with all the securities her mother had installed. This place was totally out of character for May who lived a stark, no frills life style. She kept a low profile on it, sharing only with a few very close friends. Melinda May only had a few very close friends.
“Who sleeps in all them rooms?” Mary Sue pointed to the archway off the kitchen.

May followed her finger and smiled. “Those are ‘just in case’ rooms.” Mary Sue looked up at her visibly confused. “Just in case I need them for company or someone needs a place to stay for a bit.”

“Like St. Agnes?” The little girl wondered. “Lotsa kids just needa stay there for a bit.” She repeated May’s term as she walked across the tiled kitchen floor and peeked into the short hallway. Turning back she smiled at May who stood watching the child’s amazement. “All the kids don’t live there for always, just the ones got nobody.” She glanced across the living room at the few steps that led to a landing where a door stood ajar revealing yet another bedroom. “You gots even a nother room for just in case?”

“No, May smiled as she looked toward the landing. “That one is mine.”

“Oh,” Mary Sue nodded. “You got the best one, huh?”

“Well, it is my house.” May smiled.

Mary Sue nodded again and stared at the cast iron spiral stair case at the far end of the landing. “You gots a bell?”

May followed the girl’s line of sight. “No, that’s the stairs to my office…off limits to everyone but me.” She added with authority. “Are we ready?” She asked, hoping the child had exhausted her questions.

Nodding as she walked toward the door, Mary Sue could not help taking one last look. “You gots a real pretty house, May. I like your mazeum, too.” She smiled as May opened the door then looked back at the living room and realized yes, that room looked very much like an exhibit at the Smithsonian.

xx

The pair took a different elevator to the lobby and walked through the large double glass doors into the hustle of the sidewalk. May turned left and headed down the street with Mary Sue almost trotting
to keep up with the woman’s quick pace.

“How…come…yer…not…drivin...yer...car?” Mary Sue puffed as she tried to keep up.

“I like to walk.” May answered.

“You go…real...fast.” The little girl replied.

“Damn,” May grumbled under her breath. The kid had short legs. She could never match her stride. No wonder she was out of breath. “Yeah,” she agreed. “I gotta learn to slow down a little.”

She stopped for a moment, letting the little girl catch her breath. “Carl’s is just around the corner. No need to rush.” She nodded toward the corner and took a few slow steps as Mary Sue caught up and walked along side.

xx

Mary Sue looked up as the small bell jingled when the door to the diner opened. She smiled at the sound and took a deep breath, inhaling the scents of all the foods cooking somewhere inside. May put a hand on her back and usher her to a table with a couch on either side. When May motioned for her to climb up and sit on one she was stunned. Nobody ever ate on any couch at St. Agnes, nope not even a cookie. Sr. Jeremy said food was eaten at the table, in the dining room and only there. Not on the couch or in the parlor or bedrooms or even the porch, if you had something to eat…you ate it in the dining room.

This was different. It was a little couch and the table was really close, like you had to sit there. And the table was stuck to the wall. You couldn’t move it even if you tried with all your muscles.

Mary Sue looked around. There were a lot of little couches with stuck tables between them. People were sitting on them and talking or reading the paper or drinking out of white cups or eating and talking and reading. Everybody looked happy and nobody was getting yelled at for eating on the furniture.

“Good morning!” A cheerful, but very loud voice startled the little girl. “Usual for you, Mel?” The stout woman asked as she wrote on the little tablet she held in one hand. She looked at Mary Sue and smiled broadly. “Morning, sweetie pie, how’s about I give you a menu. Your friend here isn’t much for breakfast. Unless you just want a nice cup of hot tea.” She slid a small red book kind of thing on to the table in front of the little girl. “You take your time there sweetie pie.” She gave a smile and a nod to May and hurried to the next set of couches, greeting the couple seated there with the same gusto.
Mary Sue stared with her mouth opened for a few seconds before she snapped it shut and looked at May. “That’s Millie,” the woman smiled. “She’s a little bit too happy in the morning, but you get used to it.”

Mary Sue nodded and looked down at the red faux leather book thingie on the table. May reached across and opened it, tapping at the words on one side. “Whatever you want, kid. When Millie comes back you just let her know.”

The little girl looked up and took a little breath then looked back down at the large black letters on the page. She blinked a few times and squinted her eyes to look harder.

“See anything you like?” May asked.

“Oh, no problem,” May smiled as she snapped the menu closed and slipped it behind the napkin container against the wall. “I’m sure Millie can suggest something you’ll like. She knows that menu by heart.”

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“My young friend, here, can’t seem to decide what she wants.” She smiled at the little girl.

“Oh, honey then you have to try the ‘You’re-the-first-kid-in-her-this-morning-special’. I guarantee you have never tasted anything like it and never will anywhere else in the city.” Millie laughed as she jotted something down on her little tablet. “And how ‘bout we top it off with a big, cold glass of chocolate milk? Of course that’s if Mel, here gives the a-okay.”

May looked at the silent plea in the little girl’s eyes and agreed. Hell, the kid probably never had any kind of treats and probably didn’t even know what chocolate milk tasted like. It wouldn’t hurt to let her splurge just this once, because that was what this was…just once. She wouldn’t have the chance again, so yeah let her go hog wild.

“Sr. Jeremy never lets us get choclit milk. She says we ain’t got the money for all them rotted teeth.” She bared her teeth. “Cavties are bad. I got one right here.” She poked a finger in her mouth tapping a back tooth. “I hurt more en Sr. Regina’s paddle even cuz ya don’t sit on yer teeth.” Mary Sue nodded in agreement with herself. “The lady from the office came and took me to a dennist. He made me sleep and yanked it out. It didn’t hurt no more and he said a new one would grow in the hole. I got a new toothbrush, too.” She smiled for a moment then shrugged. “Sometimes I forget to use it and sometimes there ain’t no toothpaste anyways.”

May tried to keep her calm. Millie’s arrival with the special of the morning saved her.

“Here ya go, sweetie pie.” She announced as she set the plate in front of the little girl then put the large glass of milk next to it. “Hope you’re hungry.”

Mary Sue’s eyes went wide. She’d never seen anything like the dish that was placed before her. It held two large pancakes that almost reached the edge of the plate. One large strawberry set in the center with a smile of blueberries beneath it. Above the strawberry on either side were two round slices of banana and the smiling face was topped with curls of whipped cream. Millie turned and snatched a long rectangle of small vials from the table behind her. She set it on the table.

“We’ve got boysenberry, strawberry, blueberry and maple.” She tapped each little bottle as she named the syrups. “Choose one or two or mix them all. Sup to you, honey.”

A young girl stepped around the long counter that ran the length of the diner and handed Millie a small plate.

“Thank ya, dollie.” She smiled as the girl walked back. “Almost forgot your bacon, crisp and dry… perfect for the morning special.” She set the plate on the table and gave May a quick nod before
walking away.

Mary Sue stared at the food for a few seconds. It was too special to eat. She wanted to just look at it, take a picture with her brain so she would never forget how it looked. It smelled even better. She ran her tongue over her lips.

“Probably taste better while it’s hot,” May suggested as she sipped her tea.

“It’s the most beautifullest breakfast I ever had.” Mary Sue breathed. “I don’t wanna break it.”

“Well,” May began as she picked up the fork and held it out to the little girl, “if you don’t eat it, it will become trash and that won’t be very pretty. And you won’t get to see how great it tastes.” She wriggled the fork and her eyebrows in tandem.

Mary Sue giggled as she took the fork and dug in.

xx

May was sure the child would not finish all of the food on the plate, but the skinny little girl ate every last bite. She wondered if she was really that hungry or if she’d been told she had to clean her plate in order to follow the rules. After a trip to the restroom and paying the check they were once again walking through the busy streets. May had slowed down enough for the little girl to keep in step. They made it to the farmer’s market with only two stops to use the restroom again, once at a coffee shop and again in the basement of a church running a rummage sale.

May picked fruits and vegetables, showing Mary Sue how to choose those that were not quite ripe and would last most of the week. She also chose a large bouquet of fresh flowers and a small sack of brown rice. They walked slowly back toward the apartment, stopping in a small market to choose fresh fish for dinner and a quart of double fudge chocolate ice cream. It wasn’t an indulgence, May told herself. She loved the stuff and usually denied herself, but today…today was different.

After a quick stop back at the apartment to store the foods, they walked to the subway. Mary Sue hopped down the stairs in front of May and remembered to stay close when they entered the station. It wasn’t as busy on a Saturday when almost all of the people who used it were tourists rather than the always in a hurry folks who worked in the District. The little girl stopped and stood turning in a wide circle to take in all of the weekend visitors.
May watched for a moment then took the child’s hand and walked toward the boarding area. Mary Sue continued to scan the area. The subway car arrived within a few minutes and even after moving to one of the empty seats, the child seemed to be scrutinizing the face of every passenger. May watched with a hint of curiosity. When Mary Sue let out a sigh and fell back against the seat, she looked around at the people clearly ignoring the child and shook her head.

“Still looking?” May inquired.

Mary Sue nodded as she swung her feet that dangled over the seat. “Maybe they’s just visitors and don’t live here, but nobuddy looks like they lost me.”

“Hmmm,” May nodded then looked around the car again. “What do you suppose they might look like?”

The little girl shrugged her shoulders. “I dunno, but if I see them I will.” She mumbled and shrugged again. “Maybe they’ll see me first and ‘member me. I still look like me.” She squinted up at May.

May nodded, unsure what to say.

“Sheer says I ain’t all ayshin. That means I gots only a mom that looks like me.” She thought for a moment. “Er maybe it’s just a dad.” Mary Sue explained.

“I see.” May replied. She looked up as she felt the car begin to slow. “Looks like our stop,” May nodded as people began to gather their belongings and move toward the door.

The hub they entered off the subway was larger than any station Mary Sue had ever seen. People moved from one area to another and a woman’s voice announced departure and arrival times over a loud speaker. The little girl walked faster and slipped her hand inside of May’s then held on tightly.

May felt the cold little hand and how desperately it clung to her own. The feeling it gave her was unfamiliar. She started to shake it off but the little girl tightened her grip and May held on to that feeling she did not recognize. They weaved their way through the crowd and down a long flight of stairs that led to multiple platforms. The loud announcer said something about Track 7 and May tugged the little girl toward a large numeral seven in a blue circle. Minutes later they were seated in the train that pulled out of the station.

Mary Sue smiled as she looked over her shoulder at May. “I ain’t never been on a fer real train
She turned back to looking out the large window as the scenery clickety clacked by.

May pulled a book from her bag. It would be forty-five minutes before they reached their destination. She hadn’t been there since she was a child. It was something she and her father did monthly as a reward for good behavior and especially good grades. She hoped it would not have changed too much and this little girl would be filled with the same wonder she had been when she walked the paths and explored with her father.

By the time they arrived May had finished two chapters and Mary Sue slept curled up on the seat with her head in the woman’s lap. At first May was a little apprehensive and considered sliding the child to the seat or the little pillow the rail system provided. She started to make the move and noticed an older woman across the aisle smiling at her. She weakly smiled back then rested her hand on the little girl’s shoulder and patted gently. May really had no idea why she did such a foreign thing, but it just seemed right.

The train pulled into the station with the screeching of its breaks. The sudden stop rocked Mary Sue forward then back, bringing her awake. The little girl sat up and rubbed both eyes. She looked out the window seeing only the inside of yet another railway station.

“We’re here.” May announced as she stood and collected the bag she had brought for their excursion. She stepped into the aisle and motioned for the little girl to follow.

xx

May led the little girl into a large park. Mary Sue was silent in her awe of the large trees and well laid out play areas, although hesitant to release her tight grip on May’s hand.

“Do you know what this is?” May asked as she smiled at the brightly painted play equipment and recalled stepping down the small road with her father while singing that well know ‘Follow the Yellow Brick Road’ song.

“It’s the biggest playground I ever seen.” The little girl replied, almost breathless.

May smiled and shook her hand gently. “It is, but don’t you recognize it.” She pointed to the small houses and two large slides that were unmistakably giant Ruby Slippers.
Mary Sue shook her head. “I ain’t never been to no place like this afore.”

“It’s Munchkinland!” May exclaimed with gentle exuberance.

The little girl scrunched up her face and looked at May. She looked back at the playground full of children climbing, running, weaving in and out of the small houses while others squealed as they slipped down the giant slides. A small group of girls linked arms and chanted ‘Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!’ as they marched across the twisting yellow brick pattern painted on the pavement. Mary Sue backed up as they passed.

“They’s tigers here?” She asked wide-eyed as she gripped May’s hand even tighter.

May squatted down and shook her head, brushing a stray hair from the little girl’s face. “No, kid, there are no tigers or lions or bears. Those girls are just pretending.” She pivoted on her toes as she turned Mary Sue toward the play area. “It’s just make believe.”

How could a kid, an eight year old kid, have no idea about the Wizard of Oz? It was a right of passage. By the time May reached her eighth birthday not only had she seen it on television six times, but Baba had bought the video and they watched it weekly. It was her favorite and she could recite the dialogue with a one word prompt. ‘I’ll get you, my pretty.’ Her little kid voice played in her head, witchy accent and all.

Yet here was this little girl, who had never heard Dorothy wish she was over the rainbow or seen the explosion of colors when the door opened to Munchkinland. She’d never been scared by the Witch or marveled over Glinda’s floating bubble hovering over the tiny inhabitants there. We’re off to see the wizard meant nothing to Mary Sue and ‘there’s no place like home’ was just as meaningless. If she hadn’t promised to have the little girl back to St. Agnes by seven, they would be cuddled up with a bucket of popcorn watching the DVD this evening.

May stood, feeling the child move closer to her. She let out a sigh and wrapped an arm around the little girl. This was definitely not a good idea. It was time to move on. May hoped Mary Sue would not be as fearful of her next surprise.

“How ’bout we take a little walk and find something to eat. It’s been a while since breakfast.” She smiled.

Mary Sue nodded, eager to move away from this strange playground. She walked quickly,
following May toward a row of small wooden cottages, each with its own variety of fast food.

“So,” May stopped and smiled down at the little girl. “What’s your pleasure?” At Mary Sue’s confused look she rephrased her question. “What would you like for lunch?” She nodded toward the cottages.

“I getta choose?” Mary Sue squeaked in disbelief. “There ain’t just one thing ta eat or go hungry?”

May shook her head and hid her amusement. “It’s up to you.”

Mary Sue stared at the little buildings and inhaled the variety of scents. “Do I gotta read a min-yew again?” She asked as one side of her mouth went up in a cock-eyed frown.

“Nope, no menu,” May explained. “You just pick what you like best.”

The little girl kicked at the pebbles as she stared at her feet. “Do I gotta have brushel spouts? We allees have ‘em on Saturday.”

May bent down and whispered close to the child’s ear. “I don’t think there is a brussel sprout anywhere in this park.” She winked and gave a thumbs up at the little girl’s smile.

Mary Sue returned the gesture.

“Okay,” May grinned and put out her hand. “Let’s see what they’ve got.”

They spent the next five minutes walking back and forth in front of the small concession stands as May explained what each had to offer. On the fourth trip past the buildings, the little girl stopped and looked up at May.

“Er you just gonna drink tea again?” She asked with a hint of worry. Maybe May didn’t have enough money to pay for both of them to eat. Maybe that’s why she only had tea at that dinner place. For a moment Mary Sue wondered again why it was called a dinner when they only had breakfast there.
May raised her brows at the child’s inquiry. “I enjoy tea at breakfast but I’m considering one of those large salads and a cup of fresh fruit from that place right there.” She pointed toward a cottage that had a large carrot and an apple on the sign above the window where a few people waited.

Mary Sue sighed. “Fruit and vegables is healthy stuff. Sr. Jeremy says we gotta eat healthy stuff so we don’t gotta see a doctor so much.” She raised her shoulders and dropped them with another heavy sigh. “Salad is good but I don’t like mushrooms.”

Again, May hid her smile. “Sr. Jeremy isn’t here.” She spoke comically out of the side of her mouth. “I’m having salad. You can pick your own.”

“Can I have pizza and some a them fries and soda?” She gushed.

May’s eyes went wide. “You must be awfully hungry.” She almost laughed as they headed for the pizza stand.

“The church ladies gived us some pizza when the oven got broke. Sr. Jeremy made us eat broccoli, too. But it was real good. I just got one piece but it was the best.” She rubbed her tummy and licked her lips.

May placed her order and led the little girl to the end of the aisle where she could pay and they would pick up their trays. The row of cottages appeared to be separate but it was actually one long stand and anything could be ordered at any window.

There were several picnic tables in the shady area just beyond the cottages where the pair sat and enjoyed their meal. May was sure there was no way this small child could consume all of that food, especially after the breakfast she’d eaten. But, Mary Sue packed away every bite without one complaint. After cleaning up and making a quick trip to the rest room, they were off to visit a spot May told the little girl she wanted to visit before they made a trip to the center of the park for a big surprise.

xx

It took a few minutes to climb to the top of the hill in the center of the park. The trails were slightly different and of course had grown considerably in the years since Melinda May and her father followed them to the field at the top. Mary Sue pointed out the way the branches made the sunlight
wriggle through their leaves and jumped at the sight of a large hare that bounded from the brush when startled. She climbed atop a large rock to peer into a bird’s nest May showed her on one of the lower branches of a pine tree. The little girl was disappointed that it was empty but May explained that by this time of year the birds had grown big enough to fly and had left. She plucked a small downy feather from the nest and handed to the little girl.

“Will them come back?” Mary Sue asked, holding the feather gently between two fingers.

May shook her head. “Once the little birds are big enough to fly they are on their own. They fly away and build their own nests.”

Mary Sue frowned. “Don’t their momma miss them?” She asked it.

May started to offer a scientific answer, then realized the connection Mary Sue was making. She closed her mouth and thought for a second, watching the little girl focus on the small feather. It was a little piece of something left behind, something lost that would never be searched for by anyone or anything. It was forgotten, useless but still held the beauty and wonder of new life, the promise of what could be.

“Birds aren’t like people, Mary Sue. They’re supposed to fly off and be independent. They don’t need moms and dads the way people do. It’s nature.” May struggled to explain without making it worse.

“God shouldn’t make moms leave their kids.” The little girl whispered as she looked from the feather to May. “Not even bird kids.” She stared at the feather for a moment. “Will the babies know their momma if they see her in the sky or a tree?” Her voice seemed empty, void of all the spirit that was Mary Sue.

May sighed. Honesty was the best policy and she had no intention of lying to this child. That was no way to start a relationship. Relationship? She shook her head. It had to be that nun and everything she kept inferring. This was just a one shot deal. Nothing else. She stared at Mary Sue almost the same way the little girl stared at the little feather.

“No, Mary Sue, they won’t know each other.” May offered as they walked slowly toward the end of the path.

“Do they forget?” The little girl asked the feather.
“They just grow up a lot faster and don’t need their parents. I don’t think that is the same as forgetting.” May tried again.

“And they could fly…” Mary Sue sighed as she closed her hand on the feather and shoved her hands into her pockets.

May pursed her lips. She was certainly doing a shit job at giving this kid a good day.

xx

The woodsy path opened to a large field surrounded by a line of thick pines. Nothing was visible except the trees, the tall grass and the sky above. May smiled as she stepped into it then stepped aside so Mary Sue could share the view.

“It’s like a big garden with trees fer a fence.” Mary Sue smiled.

May nodded and started walking through the tall grass. She looked over her shoulder and motioned for Mary Sue to follow. They moved through the thick but soft growth until May stopped at a large flat rock that spread out like a blanket across the field. She walked to the center and dropped down folding her legs in front of her. When her little friend did not immediately follow, she patted the granite next to her and cocked her head requesting Mary Sue join her.

The little girl dropped down next to May and imitated her posture. It was kinda silly because once she sat down all she could see was the very tall grass that now surrounded them. She was surprised when May laid back and tucked her arms behind her head.

“The only thing you can really see from here is up there.” She pointed up at the fluffy clouds that slowly moved across the sky.

Mary Sue squinted up at the brightness, then back at May, but did not move.

“That one kind of looks like a big puppy lying on it’s back.” She pointed at a cloud directly above them. “And over there is a grumpy man with a pipe.” Again she pointed and Mary Sue looked in that direction.
All she saw was clouds. They just looked like the big white puffs that she always saw.

“Hey, look a clown!” May pointed again. “Of course, there he is...a bunny.” May smiled as she pointed to a thin cloud with two long streaks that shot out of the top.

Mary Sue smiled a little because if she turned her head just right it kinda did look like a bunny, but if she turned her head the other way it looked more like a fish. She shook her head as she leaned back next to May.

“It looks more like a big fish and them ear things is his tail.”

“Really?” May squinted her eyes and turned her head a few times. “Yeah...yeah I see it, it could be a fish.”

Mary Sue giggled. A sound that made May want to do the same. “That one looks like Sr. Jeremy.” Mary Sue laughed out loud as she pointed to a rather rotund cloud.

“I see it.” May inhaled then let out a laugh of her own.

They giggled and pointed for a few minutes imagining all kinds of fantastical objects in the clouds then fell silent lost in their own thoughts.

“It’s nice here.” Mary Sue broke the silence. “I like the quiet and the clouds.”

“This is my sky.” May told her.

Mary Sue knit her brow and stared for a moment. “Only God owns the sky. Errybuddy knows that.” She commented as if May had said something ridiculous.

May laughed as she rolled to her side and propped her head up on one elbow. “But this little piece right here is my favorite sky.”

The little girl looked into May’s eyes for a moment then back at the clouds. “I guess God would let ya have a favorite part, but it’s still all his.” She spread her arms wide, “the whole thing.”
“Well,” May began, “when I was little like you my Baba used to bring me here when I missed my Momma.”

Mary Sue frowned. “Did she lose you?”

May shook her head. “No, not really. She just did a lot of traveling for work and sometimes I missed her very much.”

“Did it make your breath hurt?” Mary Sue put a hand on her chest and waited for an answer.

May sighed. She’d done it again. “Yes, it hurt that much. But my Baba…my father…would bring me here to look at the sky.”

“So you could laugh at the funny clouds.” Mary Sue nodded.

“Yes,” May agreed. “But, so I could just look up at the sky. He told me when I did I had to remember that my momma was looking at the same sky. When I looked up at the clouds I thought of my mom and my father said my mom was thinking about me. We would always be connected because we looked up at the same thing.”

Mary Sue thought about May’s little tale and stared at the sky for a long time before responding. “Do you think my momma is looking up at the sky right now?”

May lay back down and folded her hands across her stomach. “I do. I believe she is looking up right now.”

“And thinking about me?” The little girl turned and looked at May.

“Even if she isn’t, she is still out there looking at the same sky.” May smiled as she sat up.

Mary Sue did the same. “I like your sky. Could it be my favorite too?”

“Hmmm,” May hesitated with a soft smile. “I don’t share this with everyone. In fact you are the first
one I’ve shared it with.” Mary Sue smiled broadly. “I think since you passed the cloud test and you like it so much that I would be proud to share it with you.” She put out a hand and waited. “Shake on it?”

Mary Sue bit her bottom lip and stuck her hand into May’s then shook rapidly. “Now, it’s our sky, me and you and God.”

May smiled. For the first time today she felt she’d given the little girl something to remember fondly. She stood and pulled Mary Sue up with her. They followed the path they’d made through the grass back to the path and down the hill to the center of the park.

xx

The sight of the large carousel stopped Mary Sue in her tracks. She stood staring at the massive piece of festivity. Its bright lights and calliope music entranced her as her eyes followed the motion of the horses galloping up and down, round and round. Slowly she walked forward never taking her eyes from the magic before her. May smiled as she followed a few feet behind.

“It’s the beautifulest thing I ever seen.” The little girl breathed as she stood at the gate surrounding the large carousel. “Them horses look like they’s real.”

“Would you like to ride one?” May asked softly.

Mary Sue just nodded, still staring straight ahead. May smiled as she took the little girl’s hand and led her to the short line of parents and children that waited for the revolutions to stop. With tickets in hand she steered the awe struck little girl to the circle of large gaily decorated horses. Mary Sue stared at a white steed with flowing gold hair and purple daisies painted along its neck. The saddle was deep purple with gold stirrups.

“Hello, little lady,” the ride operator greeted them as they stepped on to the base of the machine. “Looks like you’ve made your choice.” He put his hands around her hips and lifted her to the saddle and buckled a safety strap around her middle. He smiled at May as she moved to stand next to the little girl. “She’s a beauty, mom. Looks just like her beautiful momma.”

Before May could correct him, he was gone. The music started and the ride began taking Mary Sue up and down as she held tightly to the striped pole that held her magnificent steed. Four rides later, on four different horses, the pair was on their way to the train station happily chatting about all they
had done during their outing.

Mary Sue was asleep before the train left the station.
Unable and secretly unwilling to roust the exhausted little girl, May lifted her from the train seat and carried her to the subway platform. She was amazed at the frail frame and light weight of the child considering the amount of food she’d put away during the day. The subway was a bit more crowded as tourists made their way back to their respective hotels and motels. She stepped carefully into the car balancing Mary Sue on one hip and her large bag over the opposite shoulder. An older gentleman offered her his seat. She considered refusing but for the sake of this much too small child.

“Your little one has had too much touring today it seems.” He smiled in an accent May recognized as some Eastern European dialect. He chuckled as he helped her to slide her bag off her shoulder and readjust the little girl as she sat down. “It seems her cipele has been exhausted as well.” He nodded at Mary Sue as he held the small strap that hung from the bar across the ceiling of the car. The man leaned forward then back as the car pulled from the platform.

‘Cipele?’ May thought… ‘cip..shoes…’ Bosnian, the man was Bosnian. She smiled up at him. “We did a lot of walking today. I expect her feet are as tired as she is.” She offered, thinking the man had perhaps used the wrong term to refer to the little girl’s exhaustion.

He chuckled again and pointed to Mary Sue’s foot. May looked to the spot. The small hole she’d noticed, but not mentioned, in the toe of the little girl’s left shoe had grown to the point Mary Sue’s toe was poking through. Apparently it had been for quite a while, as the once white sock was now showing traces of most of what they’d done throughout the day. A small hole had started in that and May could see the pink of her toe as well. For some reason, May felt a burn on her cheeks.

“Kids,” she exhaled. “She’s just so hard on shoes.” She rolled her eyes at the stupidity of the statement and pulled Mary Sue’s feet closer to her and away from prying eyes.

What kind of mother takes her kid out in public with ratty shoes? What kind of mother doesn’t even notice her kid’s toe sticking right through? May shook off the thought. Hell, she was not the kid’s mother. She wasn’t anybody’s mother, never would be.

She smiled at the man who smiled back and said no more.
As the car hissed to a stop at May’s exit, Mary Sue rubbed an eye and gave a wide yawn. She slid off May’s lap and held tightly to her hand as she half-sleep walked out of the station to the sidewalk above. It was a short walk back to May’s apartment and the little girl did most of it with one or both eyes closed. When she felt herself eased into a large chair and heard muffled voices of more than one adult she scrubbed a hand under her nose and pushed herself up to sit straight.

The little girl sniffed once and then again. This place had a weird smell. She opened her eyes to the bright light and turned her head quickly when she did not see May. Standing, Mary Sue tried to quell the panic. Had she wandered away? What was this place and why did it smell like big leather chair in Father Simon’s office.

“You’re finally awake,” May’s voice sounded amused. “Didn’t know anyone could navigate that far in their sleep.” She laughed slightly.

Mary Sue tried to slow her breathing as she lowered herself back into the chair that seemed to be attached to a whole line of chairs. She blinked several times as she looked in all directions.

May sat next to her and placed a hand over hers. “You okay, kid?”

Mary Sue swallowed hard and nodded. Before she could answer a man with hair only on the sides of his head pulled a little chair that looked a lot like a tiny sliding board in front of her. He pushed back his big glasses and put a black and silver metal thing on the floor in front of her.

“How ’bout we measure first? Gotta make sure we get the right fit.” He smiled as he reached down, took her right foot and slipped off her grungy sneaker.

Mary Sue pulled back against the chair and yanked her feet up in front of her, wrapping both arms around her knees. She looked at May with wide eyes. The man looked just as startled.

“Hey, hey…it’s okay kid.” May assured her. “He just wants to measure your foot.

“Why?” Mary Sue whimpered softly. “What’s he gonna do ta me?”

May looked at the man who seemed confused. “She’s just a little tired.” She explained to him then
turned to Mary Sue. “He is going to get you sneakers that don’t have any holes and he needs to know what size.”

The little girl leaned forward and glared at the metal took on the floor in front of seat. “Will it hurt?” She whispered.

May shook her head, but Mary Sue didn’t seem convinced. Without a thought, May slipped off her own shoe and slid it on to the Brannock Device. She gave a quick nod, motioning for the shop owner to put it to work. He moved the little buttons and levers then announced the size May would need.

“See, simple as that.” She smiled at Mary Sue as she slipped her foot back into her black sneaker.

The little girl was hesitant, but slid to the edge of the seat and stood on the device. The man smiled at her as he moved the levers again then told her she could sit back down. He stood and walked away entering a little door between two very tall shelves.

“You should have told me about your shoes, kid. You could have hurt yourself out there today.” May told the child gently.

Mary Sue hung her head. “S’just a little hole. It ain’t bad and only in one shoe.”

May shook her head and picked up the shoe. She slipped her hand inside and poked two fingers through the hole in the toe. Mary Sue shrugged. May pursed her lips and turned the shoe over exposing the hole in the sole then showed the little girl the matching hole in the other shoe. Mary Sue chewed her bottom lip and stared at her fingers that she folded in her lap.

“They didn’t have no shoes to fit me yet but I’s next on the list when my size gets there.” She explained in little more than a soft mumble. “I’m sorry, don’t be mad…” Her voice wound down to little more than a hushed whisper.

“Mary Sue,” May breathed, taking the little girl’s chin in her hand and turning her head to look at her. “You can’t wear these shoes anymore. They’re going to fall apart. That isn’t your fault.” May waited for a response that didn’t come as Mary Sue blinked away an errant tear. Wiping away the one that escaped with her thumb, May smiled.
“Does somebuddy leave shoes here for kids?” The little girl asked as she looked around again. “Mr. Morrison brings ’em to St. Agnes in his truck. He gets them at the center. Sometimes he brings coats, too.” She pulled her feet back up on the chair and hugged her knees. “But ownee inna winter time. I got one last time so I don’t get none this time.” She shook her head.

May’s mind went to the four or five coats she always had throughout childhood and the shoes she sometimes refused to wear because they were the wrong color or had the wrong kind of laces or the other kids had different shoes that she just had to have. For a moment she thought of herself as a spoiled brat. Here was a kid that had one pair of shoes and they were thread-bare.

The salesman returned with a stack of boxes and plopped back on the odd chair in front of Mary Sue. “Wasn’t sure what you were looking for exactly, but these are the most popular styles.” He opened the first box and took out a bright red shiny high top sneaker.

Mary Sue did not react. The man opened the next box and displayed a very white sneaker with a black swoosh on the side. Again the little girl simply watched. The next pair was a simple white canvas sneaker that might have been what Mary Sue’s holey sneaks looked like at one time. The last box held a pair of pink shoes with sparkly trim and two stars on each heel. They were sprinkled with sparkles that reflected the light like tiny rainbows. Mary Sue’s eyes smiled even though she refused to let the rest of her face do the same.

“What do you think?” May asked.

“Ain’t nobuddy ever weared these shoes.” Mary Sue marveled as she stood and gently passed her hand over each pair the man had put in a row across the chairs.

“Nope, they’re brand new.” May smiled.

“I ain’t never had brand new shoes nobuddy wored.” Mary Sue told her in a serious tone.

“I can bring out a few more styles if you don’t see anything you like.” The salesman told May.

“Sr. Stephanie says we need ta have sensbul shoes.” The little girl sighed. “They needa last til your size gets dropped off.”

“Well, these are all your size,” May explained. “You just need to pick which pair you like the most.”
Mary Sue laid her hand on the plain white canvas sneakers yet could not take her eyes off the pink pair. “These is kinda sensbul, I think.” She patted them softly.

The salesman smiled with relief. There was something very odd about this kid and her mother. He was anxious to complete the sale and be done with it. He motioned for the little girl to sit down then eased her feet into the shoes and pulled the laces snug before tying them.

Mary Sue stared at her feet for a moment before the man suggested she get up and walk around in them to be sure of the fit. That seemed a little silly to the child but she complied and walked across the shoe then back. The man asked how the shoes felt. When she didn’t answer he asked if they hurt anywhere or pinched or slipped on her heels. She shook her head to every inquiry.

“She’ll be wearing them.” May informed the salesman as they walked toward the register. She carried the box under her arm and set it on the counter, slipped the man her credit card and waited for him to complete the sale. Holding up two fingers she signaled him silently that she would be taking two pairs. He nodded his understanding and rang up the sale.

Mary Sue stood in front of a small mirror that stood on the floor. She could only see up to her knees but she only looked at her feet and the brand new sneakers than no one else had ever worn. The smile on the little girl’s face said enough. She turned and wrapped her arms around May’s middle almost knocking the woman off balance.

“Thank you, May. I ain’t never had sneaks like these. I ain’t never had shoes from a store, just from what the ladies give to use from the rubbage sale or them big clothes hamsters.” She had already turned back to the mirror to admire her new footwear. “I ain’t never gonna get them dirty or holey or nuttin’.” She shook her head as she assured May she would care for this marvelous gift.

May smiled as she watched the joy this simple act brought to this kid. But suddenly a cloud came over that joy and Mary Sue turned with a serious frown.

“Maybe Sr. Stephanie won’t let me keep these cuz the udther kids ain’t got no new store shoes. It ain’t fair I got some and they got only the already worned ones.” She dropped her gaze to stare at her new prize as she lifted the toes of one and then the other. “Maybe we otta give ’em back to the man and get some at the army place.”

May frowned at how quickly Mary Sue’s enthusiasm turned to regret. Army place? It took a moment for her to realize the kid was referring to the Salvation Army center that probably sold second hand sneakers. She shook her head. Two things you should never wear after someone else wore them in shoes and underwear. She said a silent prayer that the Sisters of St. Agnes did have the
funds to buy fresh, clean undergarments for all of the children then added that question to the mental list she’d already formed.

Squatting down to the little girl’s level she set her package next to her and lifted the child’s chin. “Your old shoes just fell apart, kid. I can’t have you walking all over in your stocking feet. I’m pretty sure Sr. Stephanie will understand.” She gave a weak smile but got none from Mary Sue. Standing, she let out a soft sigh and picked up her bag. “Well, if you think it will help I can step on them a couple times and you can scuff your toes down the sidewalk all the way back to the apartment.”

“Uh uh,” the little girl shook her head rapidly and stepped back trying to hide one foot and then the other.

May smiled as she headed for the door with Mary Sue a few steps behind. “You know,” she remarked as she held the door open and waited for the little girl to step out under her arm. “Shoes don’t stay new and kids feet grow pretty fast, so in a few months you can let one of the other kids use them. You think Sr. Stephanie would approve that?”

Mary Sue thought for a moment as her smile returned. She nodded and slipped her hand inside of May’s. “I think she’s gonna like that. I’m gonna keep them real good so the next kid gets store shoes too.”

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It took a little longer than usual to walk the last four blocks to May’s apartment building. Mary Sue was careful not to step anywhere that might make a mark on her new shoes and twice she backed against a doorway to prevent the many passersby from inadvertently stepping on them. Once inside the elevator the little girl let out a relieved breath. She watched the numbers change and stop at three then followed May down the long hallway to the door they’d entered earlier that day.

Once the door was unlocked May pushed it open and motioned for the little girl to enter. Mary Sue hesitated for a moment then stepped inside and once again stopped where the white carpet met the light hardwood floor of the foyer.

May smiled as she set down her large bag and stowed the package from the shoe store in a small cabinet over the washer in the little room off the kitchen. “You can step on it,” she smiled. “It doesn’t bite.”

Mary Sue looked back for a moment, scrunching up that little nose and making that ‘I’m not sure
what you mean’ face again. “Rugs don’t never bite, less they gots fleas.” She squatted down and
passed her hand over the soft pile that looked as if no one ever stepped on it. “One time the foster
place got fleas inna carpets and I got all bites on my legs. They got fected and I got lotsa shots on
my butt.” She stood and shook her head. “The lady from the social place took me back to St. Agnes
and I hadda take yucky medicine til all the scabs came off.”

May made a scrunch up face of her own. It was more of disgust with how someone could let a
child get to that point than it was of confusion.

“S’okay,” Mary Sue held up a hand. “They’s all gone now. The doctor said I’s lergic to them and
that’s why it got all bad and yucky. He said maybe they wasn’t fleas but the fosters threwed the rug
away so we didn’t know.” She shrugged her shoulders.

May let out another breath. This kid talked about her tragedies as if they were just every day
occurrences and for a second May hoped that they weren’t. She pulled open the refrigerator and
smiled at Mary Sue. Time to change the subject. “Why don’t you have a seat while I get supper
started? We can eat before I take you back.” She heard a soft plunk and turned quickly to find the
child cross legged on the floor with her hands folded on her lap.

May felt the lump in her throat. “Mary Sue you don’t have to sit on the floor. Go sit on the couch. I
can turn on the television for you. There must be something on you can watch for a bit.”

The little girl shook her head. “Uh uh, you gots nice clean furniture and lotsa stuff that breaks real
easy. My clothes is not so good for sittin’ on all white couches and sometimes I touch stuff and it
gets all broke. I busted a trophy thing onna table I knocked inta and that foster hit me widda belt til I
got lines on me.” Again the little girl shrugged. “Then I couldn’t live there no more. He said I’s a
klutz.”

“Okay,” May put up a hand. There just wasn’t a subject that didn’t relate to some horrid story from
this kid’s very short past. “How ‘bout you come sit here at the table while I get everything ready.”
She pulled out a chair and flicked on a small TV that set on the counter then flipped through the
channels til some animated horses seemed worth a view.

Mary Sue pushed herself up on the chair and watched for a moment. “We don’t got a TV at St.
Agnes but there’s one in the center. We getta watch it on Sunday, but just for one movie. I ain’t
never seen this little ponies all talking and flying.”

‘Damn’, May thought to herself as she laid the fresh fish on her stove top grill. ‘Not even the
smallest thing…”
May said the fish was salmon and that it was one of the best things for you. Mary Sue wasn’t quite sure. She took a bite and chewed, swallowed quickly and took a long drink of the water May had set in front of her. The rice was good and even the funny peas that were still inside the pod tasted great, but the little girl knew not to complain. You ate what was put in front of you and you didn’t question it. She took another bite of the fish and tried not to grimace as she chewed it quickly, swallowed and gulped more water.

Cutting her fish carefully and taking small bites, May watched the little girl try to enjoy her meal. “You know,” she pointed with her fork. “Not everyone cares for fish.”

Mary Sue swallowed another bite followed by more water. “Sr. Jeremy only gives us tuna fish on Fridays.” She spoke around an attempt not to make a ‘yuck face’ then picked up her water glass and realized it was empty.

Mary smiled, picked up the pitcher from the center of the table and refilled the glass. The little girl immediately took a long swallow.

“This ain’t nothin’ like a tuna fish sandwich.” She shook her head and poked at the remainder on her plate. “This kinda smells like the stuff Father Simon feeds Alabaster.”

“Alabaster?” May’s brows rose as she continued eating her meal. She took a sip of tea and peered over its lip at Mary Sue.

Mary Sue laughed, puffed out her cheeks and held her arms out wide at her sides. “That’s Fr. Simon’s big old cat. He just sits onna rocker and sleeps. He don’t pet.”

May tried not to choke on her tea and quickly brought a napkin to her mouth. This little imp was comparing her top choice fresh salmon to cat food. Well, Mary Sue was nothing if not honest.

“Guess you aren’t a fan.” She gave a smiley pout at the little girl as she reached for her plate.

“It’s okay…I guess.” Mary Sue shrugged, holding on to the edge of the plate and looking at May with a hint of fear. “I’ll eat it. I’ll eat all of it.” There was a bit of panic stirring in the little girl’s voice. She stabbed her fork into a large chunk of the fish and shoved it into her mouth, chewing
slowly.

May could see the distaste in the girl’s eyes. “Mary Sue, you don’t have to eat it if you don’t like it.” Again she tried to take the child’s plate.

Mary Sue shook her head and swallowed hard. She poked her fork into another chunk, but May gently took it from her hand. “You know, you had an awful lot to eat today, all that pizza and those giant pancakes and that candy apple before we left the park. I wouldn’t want you to be sick. Sr. Stepanie would be pretty upset if I brought you back with a tummy ache. Would she?”

She really hope Mary Sue agreed since having a tug of war over a plate with an eight-year old was not how May wanted to end their up and down day.

“But ya buyed it and cooked it and kids in other countries is starving and ya shouldn’t throw food away and…”

May held up one finger, silencing the girl. “Yes, I bought it and I cooked it, so I guess I can decide what happens to it. My neighbor has a big old cat of her own and I bet old Winkie would love a salmon dinner.” She smiled at the little girl who slowly released her side of the plate.

May smiled a quick nod. She took the little girl’s plate and her own to the sink and placed them inside. Mary Sue watched for a moment, swinging her legs under the table. May disappeared around the big refrigerator. The little girl heard it open then close. A few minutes later it opened and closed again. May returned and placed a small dish of chocolate ice cream in front of her.

“I think that will help your palate lose the fish taste.” She smiled as she sat down with her own dish of the same treat.

“What about…” Mary Sue put a hand on her tummy. May understood.

“Chocolate ice cream is known for taking care of all kinds of ills.” She explained around a mouthful. It wasn’t really a lie. Quarts of the delicacy helped her get through some of her worst moments. Furthermore she was pretty sure this kid had a cast iron constitution. “But if you think it…” May reached for the small dish.

Mary Sue sat up quickly and wrapped her hand around the spoon. She scooped a mound into her mouth and smiled at May. She swallowed and wiped the excess off her lips with the back of her sleeve. “Yer right, it makes my tummy cold all the way down.” The little girl wriggled in her seat
and scooped up another spoon full.

After they finished, May cleared the table. Mary Sue helped place the dishes carefully in the dishwasher, explaining that at St. Agnes they had to share the chores after meals. She usually got sweeping the floor as her assignment, ‘cuz I dropped too many dishes’. The little girl explained with a shrug.

“They doesn’t break cuz we uses just the not breaking kind but they make lotsa noise.” She elaborated as she gently placed silverware into a small basket on the washer’s lower level. “Sr. Jeremy says I’m too clumsy to do it. She got that big spoon thing ta smack ya with if yer clumpy too much, but after I didn’t be inna kitchen anymore she didn’t have ta.” She let out a long breath and stood back as May closed the door and pushed the button to start the machine. “Cept when I knocked the trash onna floor. I hadda pick it all up and then go see Sr. Regina.” She shook her head as she walked away. “She didn’t hit me that time, cuz Sr. Stephanie said I got smacked nuff with the spoon thing. It makes egg circles on ya.”

May drew a deep breath. She had a lot to say to those nuns and knocking Jeremy on her ass looked better and better. “Egg circles?” She wondered.

Mary Sue nodded. “Yeah, cuz the spoon is like a egg but flat and it makes a foot print on ya wherever it smacks. That’s why I got these on my arms.” She poked out both arms allowing May to see the marks. Some looked older than others. “These is from when Polly said I took the cookies.” She poked at four fresh marks then frowned. “That’s when I yelled and said bad words to her so she smacked me here too.” She pointed to her hip and thigh.

May was on her knees in front of the child, fighting back tears of anger and sympathy. She rubbed her hand lightly over the little girl’s arm. “What about these, kiddo? How’d you get these?”

The little girl shrugged. “I spilt milk on Polly’s lap at breakfast. She said I did it on purpose but it was a accident cuz Polly put it onna edge by my arm and I ain’t spose ta sit by her inny way.”

May took the child’s hand in her own. “Kid, don’t you know these women aren’t supposed to do this.”

“But I’m bad lotsa times.” Mary Sue looked down at her new shoes remembering how good it felt to put them on and walk around that store. “That’s why nobuddy wants me and I gotta find my mom and dad before it’s too late.”

May wanted to take this little waif in her arms and hold her until… No, she couldn’t do that. Instead
she stood and looked down at the little girl before glancing at the large clock on the living room wall. It was almost six-thirty and she’d agreed to have the kid back by seven.

“You’re not bad, kid and I’m sure someone will come along and see you are the best kid in the world.” She smiled down as she tucked a stray hair behind the little girl’s ear.

Mary Sue shook her head. “I gotta find my mom. She’s out there. I know it and she needs me just like I need her.”

“I know that’s what you want, kid. But I think you’re old enough to know you don’t always get what you want.” May sighed.

“That’s why I need her, May. Sr. Stephanie says God doesn’t give ya what ya want. He gives ya what ya need. I pray alla time and tell him I need her. He gotta hear me cuz he hears everybuddy.”

“Yeah,” May agreed before the little girl became hysterical. “Yeah, he hears everyone.” She assured the child but wondered how an all powerful God could put a skinny little kid in such a damn rotten situation.

“We better get going kid. Sr. Stephanie expects you by seven.”

Mary Sue nodded and headed for the door.
Chapter Summary

May takes Mary Sue back to St. Agnes and has second thoughts about everything
Mary Sue thinks she's ruined it all and must find her parents before it's too late

Melinda May drove through the dark streets of DC. A light rain had begun and she thanked
whatever had kept it from falling until now. Mary Sue had been quiet on the drive back to St.
Agnes, answering May’s questions with one word replies or simple shrugs. When not even that was
apparent May turned to face the child as soon as she met a red light. Once again Mary Sue had
slumped over in blissful sleep. May couldn’t help smiling.

The drive across the district took longer than expected. May pulled into the space in front of the
large dark building at half past seven. She let out a soft breath and pushed the door open. This time
there was no rousting the sleepy little girl. May released the seat belt and hoisted the child up on her
shoulder. Mary Sue’s head rested against her shoulder while her thin arms dangled as well as her
pencil thin legs. At the top of the stairs she pressed the buzzer and jostled her bundle, hoping to
wake the child before the door opened. No such luck, Mary Sue was out cold…down for the count.

“May…” Sr. Stephanie began as she opened the heavy door and stepped aside to let her enter.

“Traffic was worse than I expected, must have been an accident or some damn construction
problem. I know, I know I promised by seven but…” May held up a hand to stop whatever the nun
was going to say.

Sr. Stephanie pushed the door closed and smiled. “I guess you’ve worn out our little whirlwind.
That is not an easy accomplishment.” She turned her head to look at the little girl’s face, brushing
the hair away to see it fully. “She certainly is out. Isn’t she?”

“Fell asleep in the car,” May agreed. “Couldn’t wake her, we had a busy day.” May agreed,
swaying to and fro without even realizing she was doing so.

Sr. Stephanie put a hand on the little girl’s back and rubbed gentle. “Mary Sue, sweetie, it’s time to
wake up. Come now, I’ll help you to your room.”
May instinctively turned the child away, but Mary Sue did not stir. “How ’bout you just show me where she sleeps and I’ll get her there.”

Sr. Stephanie stood back and became serious. “That would be highly irregular, May. Unless the children are sick we expect them to take care of their own simple needs. I think if you set her down, I can get her to her room.”

May shook her head. “I don’t think it would hurt just this once for someone to carry this little girl up those stairs and tuck her in. I’m sure it won’t spoil her or give her too much of an indulgence.” She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“I am not trying to be cruel, May. I assure you. I have Mary Sue’s best interest at heart, truly I do.” Sr. Stephanie explained, apparently ignoring May’s tone. “We do understand that the children need affection and nurturing but to tuck in every one of them every night is impossible. We say our nightly prayers and our good nights then the children are off to their respective dormitories. If you do this, she’ll miss it so terribly when it doesn’t happen again. That is just the way our Mary Sue thinks and feels. She feels things so deeply.”

“And she is sound asleep. She’ll never know I carried her up those stairs. So we can stand here debating this until sunrise or you can give in just this once and lead the way.” May spoke very quietly.

For a moment the two women stared into each other’s eyes until Sr. Stephanie let out a slow breath then held out an arm toward the wide staircase.

“She will miss evening prayers.” Sr. Stephanie spoke softly as they started up the stairs.

“I’m sure God will forgive her, she’s already been through enough hell.” May grumbled under her breath.

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May followed Sr. Stephanie down the long dark hallway, cringing at the thought of small children shuffling themselves off the bed through it. Her mother was not the most outwardly affectionate parent but she did make sure young Melinda was tucked into bed every night that she was at home. Baba not only tucked her in but there were stories and lullabies and long talks about everything and nothing. It was something she hadn’t thought about in forever, but now it seemed like the best part
of childhood. Her home was bright and open and a small nightlight glowed in her bedroom until she left for college. The small lights that illuminated this hallway made that little bulb seem like a beacon. The large paintings of saints and martyrs gave the impression of one of those wild haunted houses people tortured themselves with during the Halloween season. Without realizing it she tightened her grip on the little girl in her arms.

Sr. Stephanie seemed to glide down the gloomy hall, stopping at the door farthest from the landing at the top of the stairs. The area was the least lit and the dark wood of the walls did nothing to compliment the tiny bulbs in the sconces. She smiled at May as she opened the door and motioned for her to enter.

“Mary Sue’s bed is the last, against the far wall.” She spoke quietly but her voice still echoed in the emptiness. A very dim lamp flicked on as Sr. Stephanie made her way across the room. “I’ll bring her night clothes.” The nun moved to a large bureau near the foot of the small bed and slowly pulled open one of the bottom drawers.

May stepped carefully across the bare wood floor and lowered the little girl onto the not so white pillow and a plain green blanket that reminded her very much of those used by the military. She stood and took in the room as her eyes adjusted to the lack of light.

It wasn’t an overly large room but since there was very little in it, it didn’t seem to matter. There were three other beds, covered with the same color blankets and pillows. A second bureau stood against the opposite wall but did not match the first. Each small bed had what appeared to be a foot locker at its base though none were labeled or locked. A large double door on one wall was more than likely a closet shared by the four occupants. May swallowed the urge to let out a huff of disgust as she realized that one closet would be more than enough for the little these children had to call their own. There were no toys or wall decorations or frills of any kind. The light did not allow May to recognize the color of the walls but she was sure it was some drab shade of green or yellow, if not a shabby faded whitewash. The one window was covered with a dark colored curtain, drawn to keep out any additional light, she assumed.

She let out a sigh and reached down, slipping off Mary Sue’s new shoes then turned and almost plowed them into Sr. Stephanie’s midsection. The nun looked down with surprise. May looked at the shoes in her hands and then back up at the nun.

“It’s not an indulgence, Sister.” May explained before the nun could ask. “The shoes on her feet were falling apart. Her damn feet were not even covered by the soles and her toe was sticking out of the top. It was either this or the kid went barefoot. I figured this was the lesser of two evils.” She pushed the shoes toward the frowning nun. “She picked out what you’d think was ‘practical’ and promised to keep them clean and hole free so the next kid could wear them when she outgrew them.”
Sr. Stephanie let out a breath and shook her head as she laid a small nightgown on the foot of the bed and took the shoes. She stared at them for a moment then smiled, opened the chest at the foot of Mary Sue’s bed and dropped them inside.

May had already pulled off the little girl’s socks and tugged the legs of her jeans to slip them off as well. The sight of the little girl’s grayish panties reminded May of the questions she ask before leaving but the sight of several egg-shaped bruises on Mary Sue’s hip and thigh pushed those aside for more serious inquiries. Even in the dull light she could make out another almost healed bruise across the child’s backside, even through that dreadful underwear it was apparent someone had struck hard enough to leave a mark. She turned, anger and concern already blazing in her eyes.

“Some of the sisters are a bit over zealous in their use of discipline. I do my best to curb their insistence on not sparing the rod, but there are times I am not here and there is no one to police their efforts.” Sr. Stephanie explained before May could pose the question.

May closed her eyes and swallowed as she slipped Mary Sue’s t-shirt over her head revealing an equally gray camisole beneath. She snatched the nightgown from the bed and guided the child’s head and arms into it before pulled back the bedclothes and slipped her under. She tucked the blanket up to the little girl’s chin and wondered why there was no special doll or teddy to snuggle. Placing her hand on Mary Sue’s head, she pushed the hair from her face and mentally wished her good night…and good bye.

She turned quickly and headed out the door and down the stairs with Sr. Stephanie on her heels. Once they were far enough from the children, May turned and took a breath. It shouldn’t be this hard to walk away but the pull she felt was caused an ache she could not explain. She pulled her anger back into place and faced the tall nun.

“I’d like to speak to your Regina and Jeremy before I leave.” May announced with businesslike efficiency.

Sr. Stephanie wondered at the change in her tone. “I’m sorry but they’ve both gone on Retreat this weekend and won’t return til midday Monday. Would you like to come back then?”

May paused for a moment then shook her head. “No, no I will not be back.” She took a few steps toward the door and stopped. “You need police your people, Stephanie. Your job is to protect these children.”

“Yes, Miss May, you are correct on both counts.” Sr. Stephanie’s voice was soft and contrite. “I would request the Diocese transfer these over zealous Sisters to positions that would not have them
dealing with small children, but I could not control who may be sent to replace them or if they would even be replaced. I believe the saying is that you should stick with the ‘devil you know’.” The woman laughed slightly at the irony.

May made a half turn and eyed the woman for a second before speaking through her teeth. “I thought this place had a lot to do with God.”

Sr. Stephanie folded her hands in front of her and shook her head slowly. “I am sure you understand the meaning of the phrase, May. I do the best I can for these children.”

Letting out a huff, May turned and placed a hand on the large brass doorknob and growled. “You need to do better.” With that she pulled open the door and left before the nun could respond although she was saying something that May refused to hear. She pounded down the stairs, slammed the door shut on her car and squealed away from the curb.

xx

May was so lost in anger…in deep angry thoughts…she barely realized she was home until she pulled into the underground garage of her condo. The windshield wipers still thumped across the window. She stared past them in the still idling car before flicking off the engine and pulling the key from the ignition.

Once inside her apartment she slammed a small tumbler on the kitchen counter, filled it with Jack Daniels and swallowed half the glass in one gulp. Letting it slide, hot and angry, down her throat she closed her eyes and tried to push away the ire that filled every fiber of her being. She filled the glass again and drank it all at once. She’d planned to finish a stack of paperwork before turning it but in this frame of mind nothing would get done. She opted for a cool shower and an early bed time.

xx

Mary Sue sat on the top step of the large staircase that led from the sidewalk to the doors of St. Agnes. Her elbows rested on her knees and her chin on her hands as she stared at the large black ant that carried a crumb of something back and forth across the concrete step at her feet. It looked confused or lost or like it didn’t really know what it wanted to do with that big old crumb. After a few minutes the insect disappeared into a crack between the steps and ended the little girl’s distraction from her original thoughts.
She reached down and rubbed the dark red streak across her new shoe. One of the kids had dropped a marker off the arts and crafts table this morning and it bounced off the floor and swiped across her foot, even though she pulled both under her chair to protect them. Now she frowned at the telltale mark of irresponsibility. As the church bells chimed six times she sat back and let out a deep sigh. It had been almost four whole days since she seen May. There had been no phone calls or messages. She sat on these steps every night after supper until someone called her in for evening prayers and bedtime. She waited for that big black car to come around the corner, for May to ‘check up on her’. That was the time she always came…after supper…before bed. She wanted to tell May how much fun she had and that she still remembered the big rock and the cloud game. She even tried playing it by herself. One of the clouds looked like a big cat and another was a little bear reaching form the sun. She wanted to think that May was looking at that same sky and thinking about stopping by again…but that was starting to make things feel not so good. Especially now that she couldn’t show May how she had kept her promise and her new shoes were still perfect. No, now they were ruined and May…well, she was…Mary Sue didn’t want to think about where she was.

What she did think about was what she had done wrong, what she had done to make May so mad she didn’t even want to talk to her. Maybe it was because she didn’t eat the fish stuff, but she was going to finish it all. May took it away. But that didn’t mean a lot cuz once when she said she didn’t like meatloaf. Sr. Jeremy took it away and told her she didn’t have to eat at all. She was hungry til breakfast and Sr. Jeremy looked at her with mean eyes all day. She still didn’t like meatloaf but she ate every drop.

Maybe May was mad cuz she wouldn’t go into that spooky playground or know what munchins were. The little girl let out another sigh and stood. She walked slowly down the stairs and then looked back up at the curtains in Sr. Stephanie’s office. They were closed. Mary Sue started down the street. She’d only go to the corner or so she told herself, just to see if maybe there was a lot of traffic or the street was blocked and May just couldn’t get there. She shouldn’t have asked if she could share May’s sky place. It belonged to May and her daddy. She shouldn’t have to share. It was dumb and selfish to ask for it to be her favorite too. ‘yer not ‘spose ta want other people’s stuff.’ She learned that in catechism when Sr. Constance told them ‘bout Moses and how he had them ten laws people needed to follow all the time. She had a real hard time with that third one about ‘specting older people. Maybe that’s what she did. Maybe she dis’pected May when she told her to sit on that clean white couch or when she asked her why she didn’t close the car door.

Mary Sue was at the corner before she realized it. The traffic zipping by told her all she needed to know. The street was open and clear and May wasn’t coming tonight or tomorrow. Probably all the things she did made her so mad she just didn’t want to tell her, didn’t want anything to do with her. She swallowed hard and turned back toward the porch. She could see Sr. Stephanie on the steps before she got there. She walked up the stairs and plunked down without saying a word. The nun shook her head and sat next to her.

“I wasn’t goin’ nowhere.” She mumbled without lifting her head. “I’s just lookin’”

The nun didn’t ask what the little girl was looking for or why. She was sure she knew the answer. She’d called May yesterday and left a message. It had not been returned. She’d merely asked the woman to call back. She wasn’t even sure what she would say or why she had called in the first
place but this little imp was breaking her heart. Mary Sue rarely opened up to anyone but this
woman had turned on a light in the little girl’s eyes that was slowly diminishing.

“You know,” Sr. Stephanie spoke slowly and softly. “May has a very busy job and she does a lot of
traveling. She is probably just out of town or…”

“I just made her so mad she don’t want ta see me no more.” Mary Sue shook her head. “I just mess
up all the time. None of the fosters want me and I don’t even make my friend not mad at me.” She
started to stand but was stopped by Sr. Stephanie’s arm around her shoulders.

“You didn’t mess up at all, sweetheart. May just has a very busy lifestyle. Maybe too busy for little
girls.” She tried to be gentle.

“I could be real quite and not bother anybuddy if I really tried.” Mary Sue said with a shaky voice.
“She don’t have to come every time. I just wanna say thank you cuz I falled asleep before I could.
Maybe that’s why she’s mad at me and don’t wanna talk to me.”

“May is not angry with you, Mary Sue. I promise.” Sr. Stephanie squeezed her a little tighter.

The little girl didn’t answer, but turned into the nun and sobbed deeply. This was even more rare.
Mary Sue had been returned from four foster homes and shed not one tear. She’d been bullied and
punished and never uttered a word of complaint or cried over the unfairness of it all. To have her
sobbing as if her heart was broken was almost more than Sr. Stephanie could bear.

The little girl sat back as quickly as she had fallen forward. She brushed her tears aside with her
sleeve and sniffled deeply. “She ain’t never comin’ back is she?” She sniffed again and ran her
sleeve under her nose.

“Never is a long time, Mary Sue.” Sr. Stephanie tried to make it easier. The little girl nodded and
slumped against the nun’s side. “The Lord will make sure that you get exactly what you need,
sweetheart. You know that.”

“I pray alla time, Sister. I pray I could find my mom and dad and I pray that I won’t make people
mad at me alla time and I pray that May ‘id be my friend til I find them. Why does God think I don’t
need them things? Why does he think I needa be all by myself?” Again the child’s eyes welled with
tears.
“Oh, sweetheart, He doesn’t think you should be alone. You have all of us until He sends the family that is just right for you. He knows exactly what you need.” Sr. Stephanie preached more than comforted.

“Does he know what May needs too?” Mary Sue asked softly.

“He knows what everyone needs, but everything in its own time.” The nun continued.

Mary Sue stood and put out her hand. “I think we gotta go inside cuz it’s almost prayer time.”

Sr. Stephanie smiled a weak smile and stood, took the little girl’s hand and walked toward the large double doors. She had a lot to pray for this evening. May had promised she would not hurt this little girl and here she was putting the pieces back together. Anger was not very becoming of a nun, but she was going to contact that stubborn woman and let her know just what she thought. But first she was going to pray that the Lord would see to it that Mary Sue found what she needed in the family she had interviewed this afternoon.

xx

May didn’t sleep that night. She tossed and turned all night imagining the dressing down she could give those vicious woman who felt it necessary to inflict pain on a tiny child. Then she flipped to her side and told herself it was no longer her problem. She’d kept her promise, took the kid for the day and made sure she kept out of trouble for a couple days. If she’d put the feat of God, May almost laughed out loud at the irony of that thought, the kid would stay off the street on her ridiculous quest to find the people that tossed her out like yesterday’s trash. How could that kid even want…forgive a mother who left her in the pouring rain on a church step? She flipped to her opposite side. This was not her problem but it was going to keep her from sleep tonight…and tomorrow and the next day.

The fact was she thought about that kid almost all the time. She wondered if she was eating, if she had clothes that fit, especially clean undergarments. She growled to herself thinking about that frumpy nun raising that wooden spoon to the child over some slight indiscretion. Twice she thought about showing up unannounced during school hours to have a little chat with her and the other barbarian. Three times she dialed the number for the orphanage then clicked her phone off before it rang through.

This was not her problem.
She had a life.

She was busy and spent months of the year out of town on serious and sometimes dangerous business.

She lived in a house that had clean white rugs and furniture…

And things that broke very easily.

She had two extra bedrooms, with two beds that had never been slept in…by any visitors or people that needed a place to stay.

She had a special place with a big rock where she could look at the sky and know her mother was looking at it as well.

She had an ache that festered every time she thought of that wide eyed skinny little kid who had less than nothing.

She had to do something.

She volunteered for the next mission that would take her far away from the city and leave little time for her to think of anything other than her job.

xx

Mary Sue lay awake in her own bed long after lights out and last bed check. She watched the wriggly light that shone from the street through the drawn curtain on the window. It didn’t close all the way and left just a sliver of an opening. She drew a deep breath and giggled at the soft squeaky noise Kitty made while she slept.

Tomorrow she planned to renew her search. Her mom and dad were out there somewhere and she was running out of time. Sr. Stephanie had meetings with the same couple at least three times. The last time they smiled at her funny when they were leaving. It made her feel all itchy all over. She hated that feeling and she didn’t want to go to any more fosters. It never worked and she always messed up. Fosters didn’t have to like you anyway, not like real moms and dads. They had to love their kids and take care of them. When she found them she’d be safe and never have to get sent
back. They’d be so happy to finally have her back.

Mary Sue smiled to herself as she drifted into a deep sleep.
Chapter Summary

Mary Sue slips out to resume her search for her 'lost' mother because now she know exactly what she needs to look for
May can't get the little girl out of her head and might just jeopardize the mission until her partner knocks her back to reality
Sr. Stephanie attempts to find help with a hopeless situation

Sr. Jeremy doled out oatmeal to the children straggling into the dining room. She smiled as her charges dropped into their own seats at two separate long tables. Table one on the left side of the large room was reserved for six to ten year olds, the other table on the right seated the older children up to age fifteen. At sixteen all of the children were transferred to the two smaller dormitories at the far end of the property. For now they each had assigned seats at their respective tables and were expected to be in them before the breakfast bell rang for the last time. It was much easier for whoever was in charge of meals to just look at the table and notice which seat was empty instead of calling roll three times a day. If a seat was not filled the Sisters knew who was missing immediately.

The stout nun looked down the length of Table Two and grinned at the fact every chair was filled, although some of the children were not quite awake and two boys had to be sent out of the room to tuck in their shirt tails and brush their hair flat. Both returned quickly, having done exactly as told. These students were her pride and joy. Every one of them was familiar with her rules and the penalties for breaking them. They rarely broke any.

Table One was a different story. These were the ‘new’ kids, the young ones who had a lot to learn and the stubborn ones who disregarded most of her rules about manners and respect. None of them was guiltier than one Mary Sue Poots who was regularly the last to get herself to the table in the morning. Sr. Jeremy glared at the third seat from the end on the right side…empty as usual. But it was still a few minutes before the last bell would sound. The totally unpleasant child would slide in seconds before that sound and avert reprimand.

Kitty Wells, a quiet newcomer with a younger brother in the toddler group, took the fourth chair and softly pulled it closer to the table. She slipped the napkin from beneath her spoon and laid it on her lap. The oatmeal in her bowl steamed her glasses as she bent to take in the smell. Unlike most of the children, Kitty enjoyed the mush and ate it plain, just a dab of milk. She never added the walnuts or raisins that were offered in small bowls placed on the table like most of the other kids did. She smiled at the boy who took the second seat and nodded toward his napkin in a silent reminder. He smiled back and quickly pulled it free and dropped it on his lap. His reaction to the offered meal was not so pleasant, but he knew better than to complain. That would mean no breakfast and it was a long time until lunch. At St. Agnes you ate what was in front of you or went hungry. No exceptions.
“And where is Miss Poots, this morning?” Sr. Jeremy demanded before slamming her large wooden spoon against the metal serving cart when a soft giggle made its way around both tables. She hated that child’s name. It evokes silliness in all the others.

“I thought she would be here,” Kitty began as she looked around the large room. “She wasn’t in her bed and I didn’t see her in the bathroom.”

“Maybe, she’s with Sr. Stephanie.” One of the other children suggested.

“Yeah,” a voice piped up from the older kids’ table. “Thinks she’s big stuff since she’s been in there so much.”

The spoon connected with metal once again and the room fell quiet as all feet were flat on the floor and hands folded on every lap. “Sr. Stephanie has left for a meeting at Social Services.”

Once again a soft murmur swirled around the tables. Every child knew that meant someone was about to be placed in with a foster family, probably one who wanted to make the placement permanent. Some of the children were excited while others drew back anxiously.

Sr. Jeremy shook her head. She was not about to go searching for that troublemaker. She had enough to do getting all these children fed and out the door to school on time.

“Maybe she’s in the church,” someone giggled.

“Yeah, she said something about having a lot of praying to do.” Another voice chimed in causing both tables to erupt in laughter brought to a screeching halt with another clang on the cart.

Kitty cleared her throat and raised her hand timidly. “Excuse me, Sister.” She began. When the nun turned in her direction she spoke quietly. “She’s been having some trouble with her times tables. Maybe she went to class early. Sr. Prudence said she needed some extra tutoring.”

Another round of soft whispers went around the tables, some suggesting it would never happen given how much Mary Sue hated school and especially math. Others sneered and said she only pretended not to know her work just for the extra attention. Mary Sue was always looking for extra
The sound of Sr. Jeremy’s heavy-soled, practical oxfords clumping across the wooden floor caught everyone’s attention. She marched to the black phone that hung on the far wall, lifted the receiver and punched in a few numbers, never letting go of that ever present wooden spoon.

“Prudence,” her stern voice turned to butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-your-mouth when the call was answered. “Is Mary Sue with you? She’s not at the breakfast table and I was a bit worried the child would go hungry.”

“Like fun,” someone whispered softly but the group remained silent.

“I see,” Sr. Jeremy almost sang as she turned and evil-eyed the group almost as if she had heard the comment. “No, no…thank you, Prudence. I’m sure she’s just running a bit behind. Yes, yes I’ll be sure she has something before class.” She hung up the receiver and turned back to the group, tapping her wooden weapon against her own thigh as she walked and grumbled to herself. Before she reached the table a shrill claxon echoed through the halls of the old building. A wide smile spread across the nun’s face. She crossed herself quickly and glared at the children until they did the same and every head was bowed.

“For what we are about to receive, may the Lord find us truly grateful.” Sr. Jeremy grumbled quickly then waited until the chorus of Amen’s rounded both tables. “Finish quickly, clean up, wash and be in the hall ready for class by first bell.” She barked over the sound of clinking spoons and childish conversation.

Twenty minutes later the breakfast crew had most of the table cleared and everyone else had clamored up the stairs to respective bathrooms to take care of whatever needed to be done before the start of class at the school that made up the whole of St. Agnes. The massive church took up most of the block bordered on one side by the rectory and the other by the combination convent and orphanage. The school was directly across from the church and the two small dormitories completed the border of brick buildings that encompassed an entire city block. Inside the building-wall was the courtyard that served as a play area for the children as well as a walkway between the separate edifices.

Sr. Jeremy peered out one of the long dining room windows and tapped that spoon against the palm of the opposite hand. She’d sent two of the older girls to search the upper floors and the church, just in case that little hellion was hiding. The sound of many feet thundering down the stairs brought her attention to her other responsibilities.
At St. Agnes there was an order for everything. Just like the seats were assigned in the dining room, backpacks were lined up like soldiers from one end of the hall to the other, from the front door to the back, from first grade to eighth, green for girls, blue for boys – practice colors that wore well and did not show dirt. Heavy canvas book bags lasted and could be reused from year to year or student to student. Each had a removable name tag emblazoned in black block letters with the child’s last name only. Each was in its assigned spot every morning as the children stumbled down the stairs to breakfast, otherwise it was kept in the footlocker at the base of everyone’s bed.

Sr. Jeremy had already walked the length of the aisle, like a drill sergeant inspecting the troops. Every bag was zipped closed as required and stood facing forward with all straps and buckles tucked neatly behind. Some bags sagged with their emptiness while others bulged with text and note books. She eyed each name as she passed, stopping where the small white numeral two was stenciled on the wooden wall panel. Second grade started at that point and that listless student had not made the grade to pass into third. Her backpack, if she managed to get it right this morning, should be fifth from the end, right after Miller and before Stephens. Sr. Jeremy narrowed her eyes and glared at the small but empty space between those labeled bags. She walked back to the beginning and doubled checked each as she slowly made her way to Yannick and the three stenciled above Avery. Poots’ bag was not out of order this morning. It was not there at all. Again she tapped her spoon on her palm.

“She’s not anywhere upstairs, Sister.” The first of the older girls reported almost out of breath. “I checked all the dorms and the bathrooms on both floors. Her bed’s made and all of her things are hung where they belong. None of the kids up there saw her before breakfast, not even in the bathroom.” The young girl hurried to finish. She stood at semi-attention waiting, hoping to be dismissed before being late for her first class of the day.

“Thank you, Angela.” The nun spoke in a low voice without turning toward the girl. “You may go.”

With a quick nod, Angela hurried to retrieve her bag and line up with the others who had already formed a queue along the opposite side. That was the drill, grab your bag and line up directly across from it. Once all the bags were gone, Sr. Jeremy would dismiss them to march across the courtyard into the school, hopefully before the final bell. There they would join the neighborhood kids; everyone in the same plain grey uniforms and start the school day.

A second young teen hurried in the back door and directly to the increasingly angered nun. “Mr. Roberts says she’s not in the church. He had to unlock the door to let me in. We checked the choir loft just in case she got in somehow.” She shook her head. “Not there either.”

Sr. Jeremy dismissed this girl with a mere nod. The girl scooped up the last backpack and joined the others. Every child turned toward the door and filed out at the nun’s command not daring to step out of line until inside the school building and heading for their respective classrooms. The now irate nun watched until the last child disappeared behind the large red double doors then turned and glared at the closed door of the Director. She marched down the hall and turned the knob, pulling hard to
check the security of the lock. No one had gotten into that room, not on her watch.

Two of the younger Sisters had completed the dining room clean up leaving the room as if it had been touched. She could hear their senseless chatter above the clatter of the dishes being washed in the kitchen adjacent to the large room. That little brat had not been in her kitchen. She would know if so much as a grain of salt was missing. No, wherever Poots had gone, she had gone and would stay hungry.

She smiled as she tapped her spoon against her leg and walked across the room. There’d be no call to use her disciplinary method of choice but she’d be just as happy to march that little brat into Sr. Regina’s office and stay to make sure she got a few extra swats just for the trouble she cause this early in the morning. Regina taught the sixth grade and would be gone most of the day, but she would fill her in at lunch. That brazen little monster had no doubt set out on her pointless quest of finding the worthless garbage that left her squawking in the rain on the church steps. The nun let out a huff of disgust. This obnoxious child was certainly the offspring of some equaling obnoxious woman who no doubt sold herself and ended up with the refuse of that disgusting practice. She would make sure this child knew the error of her ways, already out walking the streets, if it meant taking a layer of skin off in doing so.

xx

Mary Sue was up before the sun. She was extra careful to be extra quiet and skipped anything that meant running water or opening and closing doors. Of course toilet flushing didn’t count. Nobody ever wondered about that cuz kids were up and down in the bathrooms most of the night. She guessed it was a lot better than having a wet bed. That was a disaster and it meant an all day punishment if you were on this floor.

Dressing quickly, she pulled the covers over her bed and stashed her nightgown in her drawer. She pulled her sneakers and backpack from the locker and tiptoed into the hallway. Every other little sconce was lit during the night, so it was extra dark in the spooky hallway. Mary Sue kept her eyes on the floor, not wanting to see the creepy eyes in all those paintings watching her sneak away. She stood at the top of the stairs for just a moment before mounting the railing and sliding down to avoid all those tattle tale squeaky steps. She caught one of the pickets and jerked to a stop before hitting the large wooden ball at the bottom, knowing it would pop off and hit the floor like a cannon ball. Slipping over the outside edge of the stairs she lowered herself silently to the floor and let out the breath she’d been holding. The little girl stood pressed up against the wall and listened to the sound of the still sleeping building. She peeked around the large banister, down the hall and let out a sigh of relief that there was no light seeping under Sr. Stephanie’s office door. Slowly, she turned in the other direction and again found relief when no light shone under Sr. Regina’s door either.

She’d made it this far but getting out of the building would be a little harder. The front door was almost impossible to unlock without pulling a bench close enough to climb up and turn the large bolt
with both hands. Dragging that bench would make a lot of noise and bring every nun running. Even if she did manage to open it, the night buzzer would sound. Father Simon had it installed after two of the kids ran away during the night. The Sisters turned it on every night so any door that led outside, including the back and kitchen doors would buzz until someone got up and turned it off. But the basement door, the one Mr. Ernie, the janitor used…that one had no alarm because he came really early in the morning and was in and out a lot so he just un-alarmed it himself. Most of the kids didn’t know that, but Mary Sue liked Mr. Ernie and spent a lot of time watching him tinker with broken toys or things that needing fixing. He told great stories about something called the Howling Commanders…or something like that. She pretty much thought he made it all up, but she did like hearing about a hero that was a lady and how she helped take care of the bad guys.

The large clock in the foyer chimed five times and Mary Sue jumped in spite of herself. She took deep breaths to calm herself and pressed herself closer to the wall when she heard a door open somewhere above. Quickly she slid along the wall until bumping into the small knob that would release the door to the cellar. She turned it slowly and took a quick silent breath when it clicked opened. Still in her stocking feet and holding tightly to the strap of her back pack she stood and listened for any sign she’d been heard then slid to the opposite side of the door, opened it just a crack and slipped inside. The little girl turned the knob as far as it would as it would go and carefully pulled the door closed then slowly turned the knob back securing it without a sound.

It was dark in the upstairs hall and the main foyer was just as dimly lit, but here it was like the dark in a cave. No matter how many times she blinked, the little girl’s eyes did not adjust to the black inkiness that now surrounded her. The musty smell of whatever was stored down there seeped up, along with whatever was in the garbage that had not yet gone to the dumpster and the cold air that was always a part of the under part of the big building. Mary Sue fumbled for the railing that was nothing more than a long pipe screwed into the wall. Carefully she counted the steps to the bottom then sat on the last step and slipped on her shoes. She didn’t need to see to tie them and even if they were messed up she could fix them once she got outside where the street lights could chase away the dark.

The cellar door didn’t open into the courtyard like all the others. It was between the church and the home where a narrow walkway gave entrance to the janitor or the sacristan or anybody that came to fix something they couldn’t do themselves. It opened to the alley where the garbage trucks picked up the stinky dumpster and kids rode skateboards or bikes to avoid the traffic. The big kids snuck out there to smoke and people used it for a shortcut around the big bunch of St. Agnes buildings.

Mary Sue picked her way across the dark cellar trying to ignore the clicks, pops and scratching noises the silence could not hide. The big kids told scary stories about the ghosts of old nuns that haunted the place, some even said they got buried there after they died in their beds and turned into skeletons cuz nobody looked for them. She squeezed her eyes shut just by instinct because it didn’t much matter if they were opened. Turning quickly at the sound of a rather loud clang, the child’s back pack toppled a small table sending tools and other items clanking across the concrete floor in a rat-a-tat that seemed endless. Again, Mary Sue crunched her face and threw her hands over her ears, waiting for the bright light to flick on and Sister Somebody to come pounding down the stairs.
She waited…waited…and slowly opened her eyes to the same blackness, lowered her arms to the same silence. Whoever built this place was careful to make sure whatever noises happened in the cellar stayed there. When she thought about it harder she realized that all the time she spent with Mr. Ernie hammer and banging on the things he fix, she never ever heard any noises when she was upstairs…well, except for the old furnace when it forced hot air through the pipes into the whole building in the winter. That made a lot of noise…everywhere.

Frozen in place, listening with every ounce of listen she could muster, Mary Sue could not make out even the smallest sound. She slid one foot a few inches ahead, then the other, bumping whatever had bounced across the floor out of the way soundlessly. She reached the large metal door when she rapped her head against its cool surface. Smiling at her success she wrapped her hands around the large knob and tried to turn it. Locked, the door was locked and she had no idea how to open it. Feeling around the old lockset for some kind of button or switch to flick in the dark wasn’t easy but her fingers found a small knob a few inches above the latch. She tried pulling it with no luck, then resorted to pushing with the same result. She turned it but her small fingers simply slipped off the rough edges bumping softly into a small bump that made a little shaky noise. The little girl passed her fingers over the button just big enough to hold between her finger and thumb tip and it moved. She jiggled it a little then moved it to the right, just a smidge…then a little more…and more until it stopped with a tiny click. She wrapped her fingers around the knob again and took a deep breath before attempting to turn it again. It moved…just a little at first…then easily until she heard the lock disengage and the door eased open without a sound. She felt the fresh, cooler air of the early morning sift through the small crack.

Mary Sue had no time to celebrate. She needed to get as far away from St. Agnes as possible before the sun came up, before they missed her. She pulled the door open just enough to slip out, pulled it closed and hurried up the few steps to the sidewalk. Without looking over her shoulder she made her way between the buildings, down the alley to the street and ran all the way to the corner. She crossed the street when the ‘walk sign’ lit up then ducked down another alley that would take her to the next block and closer to the subway entrance. She had just enough money for a pass. She could put the money back in the poor box once she found her mom and explained why she really needed to break another one of those Moses laws that said you weren’t ‘sposed to steal.

The little girl didn’t even realize the coolness of the morning until she stopped to take a breath at the end of the second alley. She pulled a ratty worn denim jacket from her bag and just caught the stale roll she’d stashed there before it hit the pavement. She snuck it off the table last night, hidden under her way too big t-shirt. Holding it between her teeth, she jammed her arms into the sleeves of the jacket and hoisted the back pack straps over her shoulders, took a large bite of the hard roll and started toward her destination. Something told her today would be the day.

xx

Somewhere in some forsaken no man’s land on the other side of the world, Melinda May pressed herself flat against a large boulder. Sounds of bullets ricocheting off of other rocks and trees came from all sides. She held her own firearm at the ready but her thoughts were miles away. Unusual for
a woman whose focus was razor sharp and intent unbreakable.

“May…May we’re clear…” the voice crackled through the piece in her ear. “We got it…mission accomplished.”

“Yeah, right,” she grumbled to herself, absently weighing her best means of escape. A bullet zinged close to her face, slicing off a piece of rock that scraped across the leather jacket protecting her shoulder. “Damn,” she growled at the tear in the fabric. “Mission accomplished, my ass…” She growled as she turned to the opposite edge of the boulder.

“May…do you read…May…” the voice of her nerdy sometimes-too-often partner nagged.

She resisted the urge to plug out her ear bud, toss it across the field and put a few bullets of her own into it. She closed her eyes and drew a deep cleansing breath allowing her head to slowly tilt back with the intake then exhaled just as slowly as she opened her eyes and looked into the face of the full moon. It was surrounded by stars twinkling brightly in the clear sky. A faint hue of pinks and yellows formed a narrow line along the horizon announcing the coming of dawn. That view…that view that always brought her father and mother to her mind…that calmed any faint fears that dared rear their ugly little heads was drowned by the vision of that little girl with the eyes that didn’t smile and the bruises that shouldn’t be there. Somewhere that kid could be looking at the same sky.

“Yeah, right…” May scolded herself. “The kid’s out star gazing at four a.m.” She admonished herself but at the same time remembered the red leather sneakers stowed in the cabinet over her washing machine. The kid would never wear those indulgences. She took them out three times with every intention of returning them, then found some dumb excuse to keep them just a little longer. Nope, this was it. When she got out of this…when she got home she was taking those damn things back and forgetting this whole thing.

Another spray of bullets rained across the short distance between the boulder she used as cover and the thicket where her team waited for her to join them. This time the storm came from that direction and that pasty white guy duck walked a run across the span and fell in along side her. He held his gun at the ready and looked at her with a mixture of concern, fear and out and out animosity.

“What the hell is wrong with you, May?” He demanded, looking in all directions as the spray of bullets came from both directions. “You’ve been a million miles away this whole mission. Get your head in the game before you get yourself or someone else killed.” He growled.

May raised her weapon and took one shot. The man jumped a bit then shuffled to the side as another man fell from the top of the rock to the ground at his feet.
“My head is always right where it needs to be.” She grinned as she dropped the empty clip from her gun and slammed in a fresh one.

“I called you four…” he fired off a round of shots then dropped his own empty clip. “Four times, May.” Slamming the new clip into the weapon, he glared at her. “We need to get out of here. The extraction team’s on its way.”

“Time to go,” she answered, stood and shot her way to the thicket then provided cover for him to do the same.

They ran through brush, trees and rocks to a narrow dirt road and fell into the back of an odd three wheeled pickup that idled in wait. The engine revved like an old man snoring and kicked up the thick mud of the road as it engaged and rumbled away. Gunfire followed them and they obliged by returning it.

“Five minutes to the extraction point, Coulson.” The driver called through the hole in the back of the cab that at one time might have been a window. He hoped the vehicle stayed together for that length of time. Between the bullets and the rough ride he was sure it would fall apart beneath them. From the look on the other occupant of the cab and his white knuckled grasp on the dashboard, he felt pretty much the same way.

A parade of vintage military vehicles bounced into view, rapidly closing the distance between them.

“Great,” Coulson huffed, “just what we need, a blast from the past.”

May pushed away the thought that somewhere Mary Sue was picking through a drawer of shared underwear…she shivered at that image, poked out her weapon and squeezed the trigger a second before they both bounced into the air as the truck slammed over a rather large rock.

“Are you crazy?” Coulson squeaked as his butt slammed against the bed of the truck. “You can’t…”

He turned and watched the vehicle behind them swerve left then right and back again. It slowed then jerked forward and swerved again taking out two mud-splattered motorcycles along with their drivers before the front tires veered off the road and the truck rolled to its side effectively blocking the way. The same type vehicle a few feet behind could not stop on the slick surface and slammed headlong into the first. The fireball that engulfed them both could be seen for miles.
Coulson shook his head. May smiled and slid her weapon into its holster as the driver let out a cheer of relief and his passenger loosened his grip.

Twenty minutes later they were airlifted to safety and on their way home. Everyone slapped each other’s back and congratulated Coulson for a mission with no losses. They poured shots and toasted their luck and the misfortune of the poor schmucks they left behind. They even toasted the small object that was now locked in a thick black case and headed for someplace call the ‘sandbox’.

May sat against the side of the large transport vehicle, head resting against the wall, eyes closed. She wondered, not for the first time, if the kid had pancakes for breakfast and did her homework and stayed out of Sr. Paddlewhacks way. She clenched her fists imaging that bruise and mentally kicked herself for not having a long talk with that witch before leaving the kid there.

“It’s not the best, but it’ll due.” Coulson’s voice interrupted her thoughts. He stood with two shot glasses, one held out to her.

May wasn’t one to celebrate, especially after what they’d just survived. She took a breath and shook her head.

“Come on,” Coulson urged. “The guys smuggled this poison out of that old castle. If it kills us, we’ll all go together.”

She let out a sigh and took the glass, tossed it back and returned it. “Tastes like panther piss.” She grimaced.

He tossed back his drink and made much the same face. “I’m not really a connoisseur, but yeah I’d say that is definitely the piss of some big cat.” He rubbed a finger across his teeth and stuck out his tongue a few times.

She chuckled, just a little, but the smile made it all the way to her eyes before she pulled it back. He pointed at her and smiled his usual goofy grin. “I knew it.” He shook his head and laughed lightly. “I knew they were wrong. I knew you could smile.”

She shook her head dismissing him. “I drank your poison, Coulson. We’ve got a long way to go. I’d like to get some rest.”
He sat down next to her, still holding a small glass in each hand. She closed her eyes and let out a sigh of disgust. This guy just wouldn’t give up. He was like an itch you couldn’t reach.

“See that?” He went on, even though she was tuning him out…way out. “You are just not yourself, May. You never rest. You can go without sleep without the slightest effect longer than anyone else in the agency. You’re practically a legend.”

“Shut up, Coulson.” She grumbled.

“All legendary license aside though,” he sighed as he stared at the glasses in his hands. “You’re steel trap mind has been somewhere else this entire mission. Whatever it is, May, you need to work it out.” With that he stood and walked away without looking back at her.

May watched until he disappeared into the group still celebrating loudly. She let out a fluttery breath then laid her head back again. “Work it out,” she huffed. Work it out of my brain, she told herself. It was like one of those music worms that got into you and you couldn’t stop singing the damn song. Everything she did or saw or thought brought that little girl back to her mind, wormed her farther into her har…no, she wouldn’t admit that. It was her brain stubbornly refusing to let go of the memory and that was all. Just a thought in her head and nowhere else. Damn, she thought about her in the field under a barrage of gunfire!

Rubbing both temples, May turned and looked out the window at the clear blue sky and the clouds in the distance. The sun reflected on the puffy blobs giving them the resemblance of giant kernels of popped corn. She wondered if Mary Sue ever sat in a movie theater and munched on the best popcorn known to man. She wondered if the little girl ever saw a Disney princess or marveled at the Boy Wizard. Hell, the kid never even saw the Wizard of Oz.

Damn, it was happening again.

May pushed herself up out of the seat and headed for the crowd in the aft cabin. With any luck they’d have something better than that swill Coulson handed her and she could drink her way into twenty-three hour oblivion.

xx

Mary Sue popped up the steps from the subway into one of the most popular tourist section in DC. She never really thought about the fact that her parents might not be residents. Maybe they were
visitors that came back once in a while to look for their lost baby. There were a lot of people that
looked like her wandering in and out of monuments and museums but she had to find just the right
couple. One had to look like her and the other...well not so ashy.

But it was still early and only a few people wandered around. And the people who did, looked more
like the ones that slept in the park and rooted through trash bins. They were kinda scary. The fact
was there were a lot of scary people hanging around first thing in the morning. They were in the
alleys and subway and now her in the touristy part of town. Mary Sue wondered where they went
when all the other people came.

A very smelly man bumped into her and grumbled something as he staggered away. The little girl
rubbed her finger under her nose and made her way to an empty bench, sitting just on the edge in
case she needed to move away quickly.

“Hello there, hunny bun,” a scratchy voice that was definitely female greeted her.

Mary Sue turned with a jerk wondering where the grimy lady with only two teeth had come from so
quickly. She tried not to stare at those two yellow teeth and slowly inched away.

“What’s a little spit like you doin’ out this early in the marn?” She smiled as she opened a sack she’d
been holding.

“I...” Mary Sue smiled. “I gotta find my mom.” She choked out.

The lady leaned toward her. “Are ya lost, deary?” She sounded like she really wanted to know.
“There be a guard along rightly. Ya can ask his help. They’s good at gettin’ little ‘uns back with
their maws.”

“No, I’m not lost.” Mary Sue shook her head. “I know where I am but she doesn’t.”

The tossed a handful of bread crumbs across the sidewalk and a million pigeons dived for them.
Mary Sue watched the bird devour the offering.

“And ya lost ‘er round here?” The woman spread her arm across the span of the area. “This early in
a marn?” The lady shook her head in disbelief. “I think yer tellin’ tales deary. Ja run away?”
Mary Sue shrugged. “It ain’t the same when your runnin’ toward somethin’.” She put her hand into the sack the lady offered, grabbed some bread crumbs and tossed them to the birds.

“Ain’t safe fer a little ‘un out here all lone.” The lady shook her head. “They’s lotsa bad folks about.”

“That’s what May said.” Mary nodded. “But, I gotta find ‘em before Sr. Stephanie fosters me out again. I don’t wanna go to some new house where they won’t want me anyways.”

“They leave ya with the nuns, they did?” The lady asked as she tossed more crumbs in a wider arc.

Mary Sue nodded. “Long time ago, but it was a mistake. They’ve been lookin’ fer me all this time and I gotta help. So I look for them too. Usually I stay close to St. Agnes but there’s a lot more people here.”

“And ya think ya find them after all this time?” The woman laughed and for the first time Mary Sue realized her skin was really black, not just covered with grime. “If they left ya at that Agnes place, doncha think they’d just go back and collect ya there? Ya don’t appear simple-minded, deary.” She laughed again.

Mary Sue swallowed hard and pushed away the thought she’d had many times, the mystery that never was solved, the question no one ever answered. “I guess they forgot.” She mumbled.

The woman stared at the child for a few moments, watching the little girl watch the birds. “Yeah, maybe,” she mumbled back. “They’s a truck round the corner there. Gives out hot breakfast to the folks got nuttin’ ‘Bout we amble on over there and see what thur offrin’ this marn?”

“I already ate.” Mary Sue answered with a little sigh.

The woman huffed as she turned her sack inside out and shook off the last of the crumbs. “Skinny little bit like you could use two breakfuss any marn. ‘Spose ya just keep me company til them folks ya wanna look through start showin’ up.” The woman stood and limped toward the long row of shrubbery that hid said corner from sight. She stopped before reaching the end and looked back. “Yain’t gonna leave me hangin’ out here all lonesome, are ya now?”

Mary Sue sighed. The lady didn’t smell real good but she didn’t seem dangerous. She remembered
being told never to go with strangers, never to trust them but everyone in this little girl’s world was a stranger and plenty of times she was asked to trust them. Sometimes they didn’t smell very good and told lots of lies. It wouldn’t hurt to just stay near her until more people came to look at the histree stuff and she was still a lot hungry and never had food from a food truck. She stuck her hand in her pocket.

“I only got seventy-two cents.” She held out the coins to the woman.

The lady laughed. “Well, that’s seventy-two more than I got. They ain’t gonna be lookin’ fer no money.” She motioned for the little girl to follow.

Mary Sue shrugged as she stood and hefted her back pack higher then followed keeping more than an arm’s length away. If there was no truck around the corner she could certainly outrun this old lady. But, there it was right where she said it would be and a lot of people that dressed just like this lady were reaching for cups and plates that two people were handing out through the little window on the side. When Mary Sue stepped up to it the young woman looked down and smiled.

“Hey, dollie,” she smiled. “Where’s your mom?”

Why did everyone just think everyone else had a mom? Didn’t anyone know there was a whole bunch of kids at St. Agnes without mothers or fathers? Were they just invisible?

“She ain’t hungry.” Mary Sue lied. “I came with the bird lady to get some breakfast.” She thought for a second. “Please?”

“Here ya go,” a man with a scruffy beard held a Styrofoam cup over the edge of the window.

“You can’t give a kid, coffee, moron!” The girl swatted his hand away and turned back to the child. “How ’bout some nice hot chocolate? We’ve got pancakes on the menu today. That good with you?”

Mary Sue nodded, “with blueberries?”

The girl laughed. “Hmmm, not sure we’ve got berries today but we’ve got lots of chocolate chips. How’s that sound?”
The little girl shrugged. “I never had then in pancakes.”

“Then you are in for a treat.” The girl waggled her eyebrows. “Be a minute, you just wait right there.”

Mary Sue nodded and leaned against the side of the truck while the other people took steaming cups of coffee and bagels then walked away from the vehicle, disappearing into the surrounding structures and landscaping. It was like they melted into the background.

“Here ya go, dollie.” The girl from inside the truck stood before her with a plate of steaming pancakes and an equally steamy Styrofoam cup. “You can sit here on the step.” She motioned toward the step she had just come down and waited for the little girl to drop down before setting the plate on her lap and the cup on the next step up.

“Thank you,” Mary Sue remembered before digging into the two hot cakes. She smiled her approval and took a second then third bite before swallowing.”

“Hey, slow down. I’m not sure about doing the Heimlich on a little kid.” The girl laughed.

Mary Sue nodded and chewed slowly, swallowed and took another large bite then sipped the cooling chocolate drink.

The girl stood back and watched the morning crowd thin. “You said your mother’s around.”

The little girl chewed and swallowed. “She’s coming by. She wasn’t ready yet.” She lied again and remembered to keep count so she could tell Fr. Simon when the nuns dragged them to confession on First Friday. She’d be doing penance for hours. But she brushed it off with a shrugged and took another bite. Anyway, she was going to find her parents today so she wouldn’t have to get dragged there anymore. Maybe they weren’t even Catholic.

“Hey, babe,” the beard guy hung out the window. “We gotta get moving before the Gestapo rolls by.” He tapped his watch a few times then pulled the supports that held the window open and snapped it shut.
Mary Sue scarped up the last two bites and swallowed her drink then wiped her mouth on her sleeve. “Thanks for a real good breakfast.” She smiled as she handed the plate and cup back. “It’s real nice you do this for the folks around here.”

“Babe!” The guy inside yelled again, but this time the motor on the truck started. Mary Sue jumped to the side and the girl slammed a hand on the side of the vehicle.

“Give me a minute!” She yelled back. “You need me to walk you back to where your mom is?” She looked around at the now empty walkway.

Mary Sue shook her head. “Naw, I’ll find her.” She shrugged her back pack into a more comfortable position, took a few steps, turned and gave a little wave then bounced down the concrete steps toward the building with the big pillars and giant sitting on a chair inside.

The police officer stepped up to the truck a second before it pulled away from the curb and chugged away into traffic.

xx

When the day got warmer, Mary Sue shrugged off her jacket and stuffed it back into her pack. She checked to be sure the two packs of soup crackers she saved from lunch on Monday were still inside and not crushed into crumbs. They were cracked but still almost whole. She planned on having them for lunch but the pancakes filled her so much she figured they’d be better for supper. Seventy-two cents wouldn’t buy much of anything so she just dropped into the side pocket of the bag and zipped it closed.

It was warm but cloudy and those clouds only looked scary and full of rain. She sat on the giant’s steps for a long time watching every face that passed, but not one person looked like they’d lost anyone or was looking for a little kid. They smiled at her and some asked if she was lost, but no one looked like her mom, like the picture she had in her head of what that person looked like. Around noon she hopped down the steps and headed for the big needle thing at the other end of the long swimming pool that no one was using, but it was still a little too cold for that.

On her way she examined each face, watched families as they chattered and laughed on their way and side stepped people who just didn’t see a skinny little girl making her way through the crowd. This was a lot harder than she thought it would be but she wasn’t about to give up. Today was the day and she just knew it.
Standing at the bottom of the tall concrete needle, she leaned back to look all the way to the top almost falling backward into a young couple doing the same.

“It is very tall. Is it not?” The young woman remarked in a strange accent.

Mary Sue turned slowly and looked at the face of the young Asian woman. Her arm was wrapped through that of a tall young man with dark wavy hair and bright dark eyes. He was definitely not Asian. “Hi,” the little girl breathed in a soft hush.

“Did you have a baby?” She asked without hesitation.

The man laughed and placed a hand on the woman’s tummy. “Not yet, we’ve got a few months to go.”

Mary Sue nodded and stared for a minute before swallowing the lump in her throat. “Are you looking for somebuddy?” She asked quickly.

The couple exchanged glances and smiled. “Nope, just doing a little site seeing while I’m here on business.” The man explained.

“Do you come a lot?” Mary Sue went on.

The woman shook her head.

“No, first time and only for two days so we’re trying to get as much in as possible. Any suggestions?” The man smiled again.

Mary Sue shook her head. “I don’t know much about this part of the city. I live at St. Agnes.” She stressed the name, almost going on her tiptoes. “Where the big church is, the one that goes all the way to the corner,” she elaborated.

“Sounds great,” the man nodded.

“I been there since I was just a baby.” The little girl hinted.
“That’s nice,” he smiled again then looked at his watch. “Nice talking to you, kid but we got a schedule to keep. Enjoy your day.” He waved as he took his wife’s arm and steered her toward a small bus that was idling a few feet away.

Mary Sue let out a sigh. That lady didn’t have the right face anyway. She smiled way too much.

A roll of thunder sounded in the distance. The threat of that storm was getting a lot more serious. Mary Sue decided it would be better to go back to the giant’s house, but she’d walk down the other side of the pool. At least there she could get out of the rain that was coming and it was closer to the subway station.

xx

“What do you mean she’s gone?” Sr. Stephanie demanded as she faced the two nuns she had left in charge for a few hours.

“She wasn’t in her bed this morning and we have searched every inch of the building and the church. She is nowhere and no one has seen her all day.” Sr. Jeremy explained.

“I told you letting her get away with all she does would come to no good.” Sr. Regina sneered. “Now, she’s run away.”

“She would not run away.” Sr. Stephanie breathed. “She’s gone searching again. She always comes back by supper. I will deal with her then.”

“It’s high time you let me deal with her, Stephanie. She is totally out of control.” Sr. Regina insisted.

“She is desperate and scared.” Sr. Stephanie replied and does not need to be punished for that.

“We shall see.” Sr. Regina growled as she walked away, clearly disgusted by the entire situation. Sr. Jeremy followed.

Sr. Stephanie walked slowly to her office and stood over the antique black dial tone phone. She
tapped one finger on the edge of the desk for a few seconds before picking up the receiver and dialed.
May is not yet back
Mary Sue is caught in a storm and at a loss at how to get back to St. Agnes.

The first two calls went directly to voice mail, leaving the nun at a loss for a way to quickly explain her reason for calling. The third call, twenty minutes later, resulted in a simple request to call back as soon as possible. When that did not evoke a response, she called the emergency number May had given her to be used only if blood was involved.

Sr. Stephanie stared at the small card in her palm that held only a hand written number, no name or address, nothing fancy. It couldn’t even be considered a business card. It looked more like a piece cut from an index card. She debated using it. There was no blood…at least she hoped there wasn’t, but it was after five and there was no sign of the little girl who had disappeared before breakfast.

The late Spring skies had turned dark with the storm, bringing the temperatures down unseasonably. The heavy clouds hid the sun hours before it would have set and the rain whipped in torrents with the high wind. The nun cringed at the rattling of the windows in the old building. A loud clap of thunder shook the rafters and several children screamed as lightening crashed causing the lights to flicker twice before glowing normally. She knew if the storm continued, if it got worse, those lights would fail. Already, the Sisters had lined up chunky candles across the dining tables and set out lanterns and flashlights for easy access. There would be chaos by bedtime, settling terrified children into beds, trying to calm all of them. Fr. Simon had called and suggested the children come to the church, already illuminated by the many candles. The very large sturdy building would drown out most of what the storm could throw at them. Sr. Stephanie considered it for a moment, but getting the children across the courtyard and back would be hazardous and keeping them out later than necessary would not benefit anyone. Beside that face the babies and toddlers could not be taken out in this weather and… And if she was in the church she would not hear the phone. She would miss the returned call.

But the call did not come. And the storm grew worse. She let out a shaky breath. ‘Damn!’ The nun growled under her breath. Maybe there was no blood, but there was all of this and she needed help and calling the police would put everyone in jeopardy and she didn’t want to admit it had gotten that bad.

She dialed the number before she could change her mind. It was answered before the end of the second ring.
“May,” a sharp, voice barked into the receiver. It was definitely not Melinda May.

Sr. Stephanie hesitated for a moment.

“May, state your business,” the voice ordered, crisp and business.

“I…” She paused, not recognizing the voice. “Is Miss May available?” The nun asked tentatively. She wasn’t really sure what May did for a living, but it sounded very serious.

“I am sorry. May is not in at this time. Can I redirect your call?” The voice asked without reaction to the nun’s use of ‘Miss’ and May in the same sentence.

Sr. Stephanie let out a defeated sigh. “No, no thank you. I must talk to her. Will she be back or is there another number I can use to reach her. It is a minor emergency.”

“I can direct you to our extreme situation control.” The voice responded, already to send her to another extension.

“Oh, no that…no it isn’t extreme.” Sr. Stephanie hoped. “She gave me this number in case of emergency and…and…perhaps I’ve just gotten a little ahead of myself.” She found herself apologizing. “I did not realize this was a business number. I am very sorry to have bothered you.”

The voice did not answer as quickly, but the soft breathing let the nun know they had not been disconnected. “May is away on a…business. She is scheduled to dee…return this evening. I can get a message to her when she reports in.”

The nun shook her head. It could be hours before May returned. She let out a soft breath and asked that she just return the call, left the number, thanked the voice that had suddenly become much softer and hung up. Another rumble of thunder and crash of lightening sent a panicked scream through the building. She looked out the office window, said a quick prayer that Mary Sue had found shelter, was warm, safe and dry, crossed her self and headed for the common room to help the other Sisters calm their charges.

xx
The rain came down hard. It didn’t start like a little drizzle or a couple big drops that splashed on the sidewalk warning you to grab an umbrella or look for a place to keep dry. It just came down like when Rusty Arnold dumped a bucket out the third floor window and drenched all the girls in the gossip corner of the courtyard.

Mary Sue blinked the water from her eyelashes and wondered how long it would take to run to the subway entrance. People were hurrying in all directions. Some ran for buses and others ducked into doorways and alcoves of attractions. Lots of them huddled around the big chair where the giant sat looking across the pool at the big concrete needle. The little girl stood close to one of the pillars and squeezed the water from the bottom of the dark brown t-shirt she wore. It was the best shirt she had. It fit in all the right places and the picture on the front wasn’t so faded you couldn’t tell what it was. Now it was drenched and stretched in weird angles.

She looked down at her shoes and felt a strange pang when she saw the red marker stain had spread out like a scarlet spider web. It leaked in squiggles and branches across most of the toe of her right foot in shades of red and pink. Maybe she was crying but she wasn’t sure because her face was so wet with rain it was hard to tell. No matter how fast she scrubbed it off with the neckline of her shirt, it was right back. From where she stood it was hard to stay out of the spray caused by the cool wind. The water actually felt like little pins poking her legs through the light cotton pants she’d pulled on that morning. Her back pack felt much heavier. Canvas held a lot of water.

The little girl told herself it wouldn’t last, that it would just be a passing shower and she could wander slowly back to the subway then to St. Agnes. She let out a fluttery breath that sent water splashing off her lips. If she could lift her head toward the dark sky, the clouds would tell her different. The roll of thunder that seemed to come from every direction and echo through the hollow structure screamed how wrong she was, the lightening that followed agreed. Mary Sue tried to remember what one of the kids told her about counting between them to see how close the storm was…lightening to thunder or the other way. She couldn’t remember and didn’t matter anyway cuz that storm was all around them.

Today was supposed to be the day…now that wouldn’t happen. The stormed ruined it. Most of the people would go back to their hotels or buses or cars and spend the day grumbling about it. Some would go into the big buildings you needed a lot more than seventy-two cents to get into, even if you were with your mom and dad.

Sr. Stephanie would be disappointed…maybe she’d call May. Mary Sue thought about that for a moment. May said she’d know, but now that just seemed like something adults said to make sure you did what you were told to do. She knew May didn’t lie to her. She promised she’d take her for a whole day if she behaved all week and she did. She took her for breakfast and bought her the shoes she ruined today. She kept her promise even when the little girl wasn’t a hundred percent good all that week. May didn’t even yell or get mad, just said sometimes ya hafta do what ya hafta do.
The little girl let out a long breath as she slid the bag from her back, squatted down and unzipped it. She pulled out the damp jacket she’d stowed there hours ago and stood, shoving her arms into it. She zipped her back pack and shrugged it back on her shoulders. What she had to do now was go back and ‘face the music’ as Sr. Regina always said when she dragged her by the collar to her office. Mary Sue never really knew what that meant because there was never any music, just a lot of yelling and then… Well, she didn’t want to think about the then part. She was pretty sure even Sr. Stephanie wouldn’t stop that ‘then’ from happening. Last time, Sr. Regina told her that if she ended up there again she’d really give her something to remember. She always remembered. It was really hard to forget when ya got reminded every time you had to sit down. Sr. Regina told her that before Sr. Stephanie came…when the old director made sure every kid toed the line…ya’d get one wack for every year you were. Sr. Stephanie said no. She wanted it to stop all together but never ever did a kid get more than two smacks with Sr. Regina’s board of education. Maybe what she was going to get to remember was eight. The feeling in the pit of her stomach that cracked like an egg and spread over her whole body was worse than throwing up.

Another clap of thunder brought the little girl out of her thoughts and urged her on. She waited for the lightening to flash then ran down the stairs and across the wide sidewalk toward the street that would take her to the subway. Until she got away from all the touristy stuff she had to run in the open and it wasn’t long before the water soaked through her jacket. Even her underwear was wet. She could feel it stuck to her skin.

The distance to the station was less than a mile, but with the heavy pack and rain blurring her vision it took a lot longer than it did to get there, even in the dark. Mary Sue let out a relieved breath as she grabbed the rail and almost slid down the wet steps. Her first order of business was to find a bathroom. All that water and cold did nothing for a little girl’s full bladder and peeling herself out of sodden clothing was not easy but she made it with about a millisecond to spare. The struggle to get the now rolled garments back into place was twice as hard, but she managed, although one leg of her pants was now twisted and kinda tight. No matter how much she tried it only made it worse. She gave up. It would straighten out when it dried.

After standing under the hand blower to dry her hair and some of her clothing, Mary Sue made her way back out into the station. She stood in front of a large board with a lot of letters and numbers that told people what train they needed to take to get where they wanted to be. Problem was, again, that she didn’t read very well and all these letters and numbers were different than the ones that went to the park a couple blocks from St. Agnes. She thought about asking someone to tell her which one was the right one, but she didn’t know what street to give them. Most people wouldn’t know what St. Agnes was. The man with the Asian wife didn’t. He said it was nice. He sure did not know it was a place for kids who had no families and there were a couple mean, scary nuns there.

There was a circle in the corner of the schedule thing. It had four arrows poking out of it, one on top and one on bottom and one on each side. That she did recognize from school. It meant north, south, east and west. The arrows were different colors just like some of the numbers and letters on the schedule. Maybe that meant those trains were doing in those directions. She smiled at how she figured that out, but it didn’t help cuz she didn’t know what direction to go in the first place. They
kinda all looked the same to her. She wished she paid attention to the color she followed in the morning but then she just asked the lady in the booth for a ticket to the place were all the big buildings that people visited were. She didn’t even look down at her just took the money and slid her a coin with a hole in it and seventy-two cents.

Mary Sue let out a breath, walked across the platform and dropped onto a long bench. She fell back against her bag that rested against the wall. If she sat there long enough she was pretty sure a policeman would come and ask her what she was doing there all alone. She’d lie and tell him she was waiting for her dad who was in the bathroom where she couldn’t go and he’d smile and leave her alone. But she could just tell him the truth and let him take her back to St. Agnes like the first time she got lost looking for her parents. Sr. Stephanie was at a meeting with a bunch of service people so Sr. Regina answered the door. She got sent to her dorm with no supper and didn’t sit down til lunch time the next day and then it was only cuz she was real hungry. Ya hafta sit to get breakfast.

Nope, she’d lie to that policeman and pray Sr. Stephanie didn’t have any night time meetings.

Yep, night time because the storm was making it get dark real early and it was taking a long time to figure this out and the trains were maybe late cuz there was a lot of people waiting. She stood up and walked the length of the platform looking at the advertisements and posters plastered to the walls. At the very end was a board that looked like the one Sr. Prudence had in the classroom. She put pictures on it for different times of the year like apples or pumpkins. Now it had a lot of flags and flowers. This one looked more like the back of the little newspapers they handed out at church. On the last page there were little squares with pictures of stores and stuff you could buy or visit.

She examined them all. Most were restaurants. She could tell because there were pictures of food on them. One must have been for a zoo cuz it had animals on it, but one caught her eye. She looked at the man with hair only on the sides of his head and skinny glasses that didn’t go all the way up on his nose, but mostly she looked at his little bowtie. He was the man from the place with the funny chair and the metal thing that told him what size shoes she needed to fit her feet the right way. She looked at the picture for a long time then looked at all of the others. Everyone one had the same mark at the bottom, but every mark was a different color. And every color matched one on that direction circle. The mark on the shoe man’s picture was E-7. She knew that letter and that number.

That train would not take her to St. Agnes but it would take her close enough to find her way to the park and then the streets that would take her back. The little girl ran back to the schedule and looked up at the marker that let everyone know what train would come next. The marker flipped a few times as she looked up but it did not say what she wanted. She breathed heavily then ran back and up the few steps to the cage where they sold tickets.

“’Scuze me,” she reached up and tapped the little window. A man slid it opened and waited but didn’t ask what she wanted. “Did E-7 come yet?”
The man rolled his eyes at her then turned away. For a minute she thought he would just close his window and ignore her, but he turned back and growled. “Fifteen minutes kid,” then slid the window closed and went back to his newspaper. “Damn, lazy rummies can’t even ask themselves, gotta send the drownt-rat, grubby kid…” he grumbled under his breath to no one who cared.

Mary Sue said thank you to the window and ran back down the steps to the platform.

xx

Fifteen minutes was a real long time and the little girl thought maybe the train got stuck because of the rain. But subways went under the ground and it doesn’t rain there. More people had come into the station and the floor was very wet from all the water that dripped off their now closed umbrellas and raincoats. It must have been supper time because these people didn’t look like they were visitors. They looked more like workers cuz they had those skinny little suitcases and lots of them had newspapers in those clear bags that kept it dry. A couple of them smiled at her, but most didn’t even see her and when the train did come the little girl was afraid they would push her out of the way as they rushed into the cars. She managed to squeeze in before the door closed and smushed herself into a thin space at the end of one seat. The woman next to her made a funny noise and moved over like she got burned on something. Mary Sue pulled herself in the opposite direction not wanting to touch whatever made the lady move away.

The car zipped out of the station and clacked through the dark tunnels making the lights look like they flickered. It always reminded Mary Sue of the big Christmas tree the people across from the home had in their window every year. The lights would blink for a long time. She and the other kids would watch from the front window of the common room with all the lights turned out. It was the only time the dark didn’t really scare her so much. After a few minutes the train stopped and a few people got off, but more got on and it got really squishy. She had to push herself as flat as she could against her soaking wet back pack. That made the water squeeze out. She could feel it puddle under her bottom and quickly pushed the sleeves of her jacket against the water that ran to the sides so no one else got a wet butt. Now, there were so many people she couldn’t see the flickering tunnel lights.

After about five stops it got better. There weren’t so many people standing and the lady that didn’t want to sit close to her was gone. A man sat there now, but he was reading his paper and ignoring everyone. He said some bad words when he put his hand in the puddle that had squeezed out farther on the seat but the train stopped and he got out before he could accuse her of anything. As the train continued more people got off than got on and nobody sat next to her.

The thing Mary Sue didn’t consider, after all she was only eight, was what stop she’d need to take. To her it was just a beginning and an end. You got on and it took you where you wanted. By the
time there were only two other people in the car with her she was more than scared. A man in a uniform opened the door at the end of the car and walked through. He smiled as he went by then went out the door on the other end of the car. A little while later he came back. This time he stopped in front of her.

“Last stop, comin’ up, kid,” he smiled, but he didn’t look happy. “You getting’ off or need a transfer?”

Mary Sue chewed her lip for a second. She remembered May got a transfer for the train to go to the park, but she didn’t want to go there. She shook her head.

The man laughed a funny sound through his nose. “Well, you gotta do one or the other, kid. You gotta get off or you gotta get a round trip transfer. Ja’ miss your stop?”

“I needa go to the shoe store with the metal foot measurer.” She tried not to cry but her voice sounded like it would.

For a minute the man just looked at her. “Shoe store?” he repeated.

She nodded. “I got these in there after he put my foot on it so the size was right.” She pulled her feet up on the seat in front of her and tapped on each with her fingers. “This wasn’t on them when they was new. It was a accident and the rain made it all blurry.” She pointed to the red splotch that now covered her right toe. She frowned at the sight.

The man pushed his cap back and squatted down to look at the shoes. “You’re going shopping on your own?” He wondered, noticing how small this kid was.

Mary Sue shook her head rapidly. “Uh, uh,” she slipped her feet to the floor and scooted to the edge of the seat. “I gotta meet my sister there.” She lied again. She was getting too good at it and she’d have to talk to Father Simon for a very long time.

“Your sister?” The man didn’t sound like he believed her.

The little girl nodded. “She’s not little like me. She’s big.”
The man nodded too, but he still looked like he was gonna suggest they look for a policeman instead. He stood up and shook his head. Mary Sue felt the panic growing as her cheeks burned and her stomach twisted. There was nowhere to run. She could not get away, not here in this train. Now, the other two people were looking at her too.

“You missed your stop, sweetie.” The lady that sat on the seat across from her but just a little way closer to the front of the car. “It was two back.”

Now Mary Sue was sure she was going to cry… or throw up.

The lady got up and grabbed her two big bags. She walked across the car and smiled at the man in the uniform and sat down next to the little girl. “I recognize those shoes.” She grinned as she nodded toward Mary Sue’s feet. “My daughter has the same pair. They are her favorite and only Sydney’s sells them. Is that where you have to meet your sister?”

“It’s by the diner with the big pancakes.” Mary Sue sniffed, then quickly wiped her nose with her palm.

“Sydney’s,” the lady nodded. “You can get there from this stop. It’s just a little farther.”

The car slowed to a stop and the doors swooshed open. The lady grabbed her bags again and stood. She started toward the door then turned back and cocked her head indicating Mary Sue should follow.

Again the little girl wrestled with what she had been taught about strangers, but staying on this car meant the man with the funny cap would call the police and she wasn’t taking that risk. She stood and followed the lady the same way she followed the no teeth, pigeon lady that morning.

At the top of the station steps the rain still pelted and the sky was even darker. The lady put a funny plastic hat on and pulled her raincoat tighter. She stood and looked in all directions then pointed up the street. “It’s a bit of a walk in all this weather, sweetie. Why don’t you come with me until the rain stops a bit?”

Mary Sue shook her head. Warning signals went off, never ever go with someone even if it’s really bad or cold or scary. Run away! “I gotta meet my sister or I’ll get in lots of trouble.” She backed away, preparing to run.

“Okay, okay,” the lady spoke like she wanted her to stop and take a breath. “You just keep walking
that way,” she nodded in the direction she meant. “You have to cross the streets about five times but you will see it before you get to the second station entrance.”

Mary Sue didn’t wait for anything else. She yelled thank you as she ran in the direction the lady told her and did not turn back to see if she was following. She kept running until she had no breath left to breathe and her sides ached. Ducking into a store front she wiped the water from her eyes and peeked around the building but there was no sign the lady had come the same way. The store was closed and dark. The little girl slid down against the wooden door and caught her breath before opening her backpack and pulling out the crackers she had saved for supper. She wasn’t sure if her hands were shaking because she was so scared or the fact that the rain and wind had taken the warmth from her body.

She sat until she stopped shaking and was able to walk again.

xx

Mary Sue pulled her soggy jacket tighter and balanced the back pack on one shoulder. She kept close to the buildings using the overcroppings and eaves to avoid most of the still pouring rain. The dark of the clouds turned to the dark of the night much earlier than usual for late spring. People hurried by with their jackets pulled up around their cheeks or newspapers held over their heads. Some people carried umbrellas that blew and flapped in the wind. The little girl pulled back and out of the way when one turned backward and flew from the lady’s hands, tumbling down the street while she just watched it disappear. People ducked into stores and restaurants to dry off or wait for it to stop.

The lady on the subway didn’t lie. She crossed the fifth street and recognized the small shop immediately. There were little shelves in the window with shoes on them. One pair was exactly like the shoes she wore. Mary Sue wasn’t really sure what she would do once inside but she breathed a sigh of relief and pushed against the large door. It did not budge. She looked up and recognized the one word on the door – Closed.

She turned and fell back against it, then slid to the wet step below. Pulling her knees to her chest she wrapped her arms around them and bowed her head. Mary Sue Poots cried, hard…something she didn’t do very often because it never really helped and nobody cared or she ‘got something to cry about’. But right now she couldn’t help it, it was like all the cry just took over and she couldn’t stop it. In the dark, with the rain and thunder and lightening and all the people just trying to get out of the way…nobody noticed the little girl pulled into the corner of the entrance to Sydney’s Children’s Shoes.

Tears don’t last and after exhausting all she had stored for…well since…she didn’t really remember, Mary Sue pushed herself up and stepped back into the down pour. She really didn’t know how to get to St. Agnes from here and it was too dark now to look for stores or places that might help her
figure it out. She tried to push her hands into her pockets but they were too wet and squished to her sides. At the corner she was almost shoved across the street by the other people waiting for the light to change and for a few minutes just allowed herself to be shuffled along by the crowd that somehow turned her around and hustled her down a side street.

Once the people started going in their separate directions and after crossing two more intersections, Mary Sue moved back to walking close to the buildings, away from the people who just kept pushing and bumping her along like she was an old bucket or a ball that didn’t really belong to anybody. She took a breath and shrugged her shoulders. She didn’t really belong to anybody. She was alone even when she was with all the other kids at St. Agnes, even when Sr. Stephanie cared about her a bit more than usual, even when…

The little girl stopped along a wall of windows. Inside she noticed people sitting on those couch kinda seats with the tables stuck between them. They were drinking hot stuff cuz she could see the steam whispering up from the mugs. They were talking and some were laughing and two ladies were carrying plates and putting them on the tables. She looked around and remembered exactly where she sat with May in the third couch chair against the wall where the big picture of purple flowers was on the wall. She looked at the counter where the seats looked like giant nails and could spin you in a circle. She remembered the glass cupboard with the pies. It made her smile even though she didn’t feel happy. She didn’t see the lady that gave her the best breakfast ever in the whole world or in her whole life, but the ladies there now had the same kind of clothes.

This was Carl’s…the place she thought said dinner but May said it was a diner. She told her they didn’t just serve dinner but it was called that because people went there to dine. Dine was another word for eat. May didn’t talk to her like she was stupid or anything, she just explained it.

Mary Sue thought about May even though she didn’t want to, because when she remembered May’s face it made her sad…happy…but then sad because she couldn’t hold on to the happy. But here she was at Carl’s and that meant May’s big house was very close. ‘Just around the corner’ May told her when they were walking to the diner. She had to remember which way it was to that corner.

The little girl stood in front of the door and squeezed her eyes shut trying to remember how she and May had gotten there just a few days ago. She gave a nod and turned right then marched forward in the driving rain. She walked the length of the block then turned the corner and waked the length again. It didn’t look right. She didn’t see the big white building or the black and gold doors they opened to get out of the big hall where the elevators were. She turned around and ran back to the diner and stood again. A few people slipped around her as they exited and one man grumbled about some dumb kid standing right in front of the door.

This time she closed her eyes and remembered something Sr. Constance used to say when she had to go somewhere she’d never been. She always said, “St. Christopher guide my steps and get me there safe.”
Mary Sue was sure if St. Christopher listened to little kids that stole from the poor box and ran away and told lots of lies all in one day of if he could even hear with all the rain and thunder but she squeezed her hands together and tried.

“I know I ain’t good, St. Christopher and I did lots of sins today.” She paused and opened one eye, looking up at the rain falling down. She blinked away the drop that struck her. “I’m gonna tell Fr. Simon everything I did and I’m gonna get real punished too so if you could please just help me just one time I won’t never ask you again.”

The little girl squeezed her hands tighter because maybe that helped get the prayer where it needed to go, then dropped her arms and took two steps. She drew a quick breath then stepped back and quickly crossed herself and whispered a quick ‘sorry’ then turned to the left and crossed the street.

At the end of the block she turned and there it was. There was the big building where May put her car in the cave and gave her supper and let her touch the soft white rug. She walked a little faster then stopped under the awning that covered the big front door.

It didn’t open. Of course it didn’t, you couldn’t just walk into somebody’s house. She looked for the door bell and had to stand on the big flower pot next to the door to reach it. It didn’t ring, it buzzed and a man’s voice asked if he could help. Mary Sue looked around but didn’t see anyone. She pushed the button a second time and a few moments later a man in a dark blue suit opened the door. She brushed the water from her face and looked all the way up at him. He glared down at her.

“Whatever it is kid, we aren’t buying.” He shook his head. “What the hell are you doing out in this anyway? You need to get yourself home.”

Mary Sue wasn’t really listening. “Is May home?” She asked quickly, trying to look around him.

“Listen kid, I can’t keep this door open. Get going.” He hooked a thumb toward the street.

“I need to talk to May.” She tried again.

He wasn’t listening. “Kid, if you don’t hit the road I’m going to call the police and they can get you home.”
That she heard but it didn’t matter because the man had already closed the door and she could see he had already picked up a phone. She turned and ran to the side of the building recognizing the driveway that went under it. She smiled at her success and ran down only to be stopped by a large iron gate which really didn’t stop her because she could squeeze right through the bars. Then she remembered that May had to use a little key to make the elevator door open in there.

She sighed as she squeezed back through the bars and dragged herself back to the street. She continued down the street to the end of the building then turned and looked up. That was it! The fire escape at the back of the building. The Sisters at St. Agnes always kept the window opened just a tiny bit at the fire escape, maybe May did too. Maybe it was a rule so you could get out fast if there was a real fire. She could just knock on the window or call through the crack and May would hear her and…well she wasn’t sure what would happen. She looked in both directions then sprinted into the space between the tall buildings.

Several minutes later she was inching along the grate outside one of the extra bedrooms May had in case someone needed a place to stay. None of them were opened, not even a smidge. She knocked a few times but she could see it was dark inside. May wasn’t home. Maybe she was at work or went to the store or… Mary Sue was too tired to care. She rubbed her hand across the scrape on her thigh and frowned at the large hole in her trousers. She wasn’t sure if the dark stuff on her hand was dirt or blood and she was so cold she couldn’t even feel if the gash hurt.

She pulled herself into the tightest corner against the bedroom window and the wall of the building. It kept most of the rain away. She squeezed her legs up against her chest and rested her head against the glass. She didn’t mean to fall asleep but she was exhausted.

The wind whipped around her causing the rivets on her jacket to tap against the rain spattered glass.
May returned to quite a surprise
Mary Sue finds warmth and safety
Sr. Stephanie finds relief

May closed the door of her apartment and leaned back against it, dropping her bag to the floor at her feet. She leaned her head back, closed her eyes and drew a long breath. She was past exhausted. The twenty-three hour flight home, on a transport plane, was less than accommodating. Three hours of debriefing afterward was just as unpleasant. She showered and changed at the base then collected her personal belongings from holding.

As soon as she flicked on her personal cell the pings and chimes of messages, texts and calls not answered played a symphony she had no desire to deal with after everything else. But waiting until tomorrow would only make it worse. She swiped through the few texts from her father, reminding her she promised to visit on her next trip to the west coast. She cringed at the fact she had been in LA only two weeks ago and had not kept that promise, but the lay over was only two hours and… well, he didn’t need to know. A second text reminded her of a dental appointment next Tuesday and her dry cleaning needed to be picked up before it was considered a charitable donation. Of course there were those ridiculous bits that thanked her for paying her utilities bill and telling her about some damn sale at some damn store she never stepped inside. It gave an option to text back ‘stop’ to receive no more but she’d done that more times than she cared to count. There were several missed calls from a number she had no intention of returning.

What the hell was than nun calling her about? She’d made it clear she was done with the whole situation and the fact that she could not get that kid out of her head was not going to change her mind. If she let herself get more involved things could get very complicated for everyone and everyone would end up hurt, not just that kid. Melinda May had spent the better part of her life building walls that would keep out any emotion that might jeopardize her ability to focus on her job…and only her job. And yet every time she got within five feet of that kid those walls started to tremble and she was not about to risk everything because of it. Sr. Stephanie kept pushing but May could see right through that and meant to keep her distance. She had no time and no patience for a kid.

There was one voice mail. ‘Damn!’ she grumbled when she recognized that nun’s voice. She only asked that May return her call, but there was something in her voice that sounded a little off…a little desperate. But it was after nine and the woman didn’t say it was urgent or she needed an immediate call back. May flicked off the phone and jammed it into her pocket. She’d call in the morning when she was at least semi-rested and would not chew the woman’s head off within the first three words.
She made one stop at her office, frowning at the absence of her assistant. There was one note on her desk…one note to call one number she immediately recognized…St. Agnes Foundling Home.

What the hell did that nun want that was so urgent?

May didn’t care. She was tired. She was sore. She was pissed.

She jammed the note into her pocket, grabbed her bag and stormed to her car.

The weather did nothing to improve her mood and the insanity it caused with traffic only made it worse. She used every word in her unsavory vocabulary to scream at other drivers from the base garage until she pulled into her own parking space under her building.

Now she stood in the dark, just breathing in the scent of home…the quiet of home…the home of home. She had no intention of even moving that damn bag. It could lay on the floor right there in front of the door until tomorrow or the next day or until she felt the need to leave her apartment.

The mission had been more difficult than any of them had expected and they barely got out with their lives. It was miraculous they had not lost one team member. Now, she had a three day mandatory leave. It was routine after such a mission. That dope, Coulson, was off to some comic book convention nonsense in Manhattan. He talked her ears off about it all the way back, even asked her if she’d be interested in going along. Yeah, like she wanted to bump elbows with a bunch of wacko adults dressed up in tights like preschoolers out trick or treating. She laughed to herself wondering what the pale nerd would look like in a superhero cape and mask. She swore if she showed her one more Captain America card she was going to grab a parachute and take her chances. She couldn’t even imagine what possessed the powers that be to partner them for any reason, other than maybe it was because he gave her a lot of comic relief.

After a few minutes, she pushed herself away from the door and walked through the dark into the kitchen. She filled the kettle and placed it on the stove then shrugged off her leather jacket and draped it over the back of the nearest chair. Tea was a good choice now…something to warm her…something to calm her. She scanned the tins in her pantry looking for just the right combination. Her father’s blend of wolfberry and jujube seed seemed her best choice. He’d given it to her to help ease the irritability that caused mental fatigue. He told her it helped her mother with the same difficulties. It always worked, but she figured it was because it reminded her so much of him and how he always just knew how to help her relax or at least face that which caused her stress.

It would take at least twenty minutes to steep it properly, giving her time to get out of these clothes and throw on a robe before climbing into her own bed for the first time in four days. Hell, any bed…
she’d been sleeping against the side of a rock or leaning against a tree dozing for a few seconds at a time. She wasn’t hungry but figured it would be wise to eat something light so she stepped around the refrigerator and pulled it open. Her supply of yogurt was dwindling and she made a mental note to stop at the grocer to replenish it. Turning back she glanced at the small cupboard above her washer.

She’d get rid of those damn red sneakers on the same trip.

The screeching tea kettle took her attention away from the small box that still rested inside that cabinet. She pulled the kettle from the heat and poured it over the tea she’d already added to a small china cup. The pungent odor wafted up immediately. She smiled at the mental vision of Baba’s approving nod then stopped when she heard a slight sound that was not just the settling of an old building renovated to look a lot newer than it was.

May knew every crack and pop her home made, even during a storm and that was not rain hitting the large sliding glass doors that lead to her terrace. It tapped a few times then stopped, tapped once more then went quiet, almost like someone attempting to send some crazy coded message. She stood in the middle of the kitchen and stilled her breath, stilled her own heart beat in order to hear the slightest movement.

For several seconds it was silent…as silent as a storm outside could be…but she used her training to tune out all of that and listened only to what was behind it…not the sounds of traffic or the large clock in the living room, not even the sound of the electricity that buzzed through her home or the hum of the refrigerator. The phone in her front pocket vibrated a soft ‘vvvvvv’ that she ignored with a silent growl as she waited to hear that sound again. She didn’t have to wait much longer. It tapped again…twice…then a rapid paradiddle…then again…then once…once…once…one, two and then silence.

Her trained ear tracked the sound to the bedrooms off the kitchen. She moved with silent stealth in that direction. The sound was too light for a person and it was next to impossible an animal had gotten into the apartment. The only animal within miles was that damn cat the lady across the hall kept. There were times it got out and yowled at her door, but there was no way that scraggily thing could get in. She remembered once, as a child, a squirrel had gotten into their house in rural Pennsylvania. It made a lot of scratchy noises and took forever to trap and release, but there were no squirrels in this part of the city. Unless the damn thing was knocking on the window.

May remembered standing over the box and staring at the tiny frightened creature. It had dark nails and held its paws in front of its body in an odd prayer fashion, almost like it was begging. Its big black eyes seemed filled with tears that wouldn’t fall. Immediately she pushed away the same image of that damn kid looking up at her…questioning why she hadn’t returned…hadn’t called…hadn’t checked to be sure she was keeping her nose clean.
The tapping chased away the thoughts and she moved further into the darkness of the hallway off the kitchen. She paused listening again to the small sound drowned out by a long roll of thunder. The wind whipped wildly after the flash of lightning that followed and May caught a glimpse of a dark shape outside the far window of the first bedroom. The tapping grew more frantic with the wind and her ears honed into the spot where it tapped against the glass.

She stepped slowly, keeping herself out of the line of view of anyone who might be there…outside…on the fire escape. She couldn’t imagine why anyone would be there in this storm and relaxed thinking it was probably something that slipped down from the fourth or fifth floor…something a neighbor might have put out. The family in the top apartment had teenagers that made it a point of using the back grates as a private spot to visit with friends and often left items that dropped down. They’d been warned several times, but it continued. Last summer she’d wrestled a large duffle bag from the grate outside her window after the large brass buckle cracked the glass. The parents paid for the repair and brushed her off with a half-hearted apology.

The light tapping suddenly woke up the frustration she had almost put to bed. If there was damage again and this storm made a mess…she’d have more than words for those piss-poor excuses for responsible adults. She moved closer, with more determination and less apprehension just as a flash of lightning lit the sky. May stopped, refusing to believe what she thought she saw in that split second of illumination.

It sure as hell was not a duffle bag resting against her window. It was definitely not a cat or a squirrel. She marched to the window and banged against it with her knuckles, hoping to wake the vagrant and dismiss them without the need to contact security or worse. The wide, frightened eyes that started back at her almost knocked her off her feet.

She unlatched and opened the window in one fluid movement, catching the small child as she slipped forward in the opening. Grabbing the half-awake child she yanked her inside and stood her in front of her, still holding the shoulder of her sodden jacket as a dripping back pack tumbled in behind her. She gave the kid a rough shake, without thinking.

“What the hell!” was all she could manage as she took one look down at the thirty foot climb from the alley below. She slammed the window closed and shook the kid again at the same time. “How the hell did you get…? How long… What the hell, kid? Are you suicidal?”

Mary Sue blinked a few times and shook off the fright that had awakened her. The little girl didn’t even remember falling asleep nor did she know how long she’d been against that window. May was shouting and shaking her and she couldn’t answer because she was shivering too much and all the water was dripping on the clean carpet and…and…she was wet…the other kind of wet…because there was nowhere else to go and she couldn’t hold it anymore and she hoped, really hoped she
hadn’t done that kind of wet on May’s clean white carpet.

May drew a breath, stung by the look of shear terror in the kid’s eyes. She released her grip on the little girl’s jacket and let out a disgusted sigh as the child’s feet eased to the floor. The woman hadn’t released she was holding her from standing on her own. She closed her eyes and drew a very deep breath, rolled her hands into fists and rested them on her hips then turned and took a few steps away. With her back to Mary Sue, she took several more breaths and released them slowly. When she turned back the little girl had not moved. She stood in the same place, wiping the streams of water that fell from her hair, ran over her eyelashes and dripped off her chin. Occasionally a tremor would shake the little body with a force May could barely believe. She took a quick step toward the child then stopped when the little girl jumped back.

Slowing her steps and dropping to her knees in front of Mary Sue, May took one slow breath. She reached out slowly and took one of the little girl’s ice cold hands into her own. “You’re soaked kid.” She attempted a weak smile that the child did not return. In fact it scared her that Mary Sue looked at her as if she did not know her or wasn’t sure if she should or could reply. May scrunched up her nose in a grimace. “You don’t smell so great either.”

Mary Sue dropped her head. “I peed.” She mumbled in a soft whisper.

May looked at the window…at the storm…then back at the condition of the child in front of her. “Yeah,” she sighed, “I probably would have too.”

Letting out a puffy breath, May tugged the soaked jacket from the kid and dropped it to the just as soaked spot on the floor. “Let’s go,” she ordered as she stood and headed toward a door next to the window where Mary Sue had rested for quite a while. She pushed it opened and flicked on the light, then stepped inside. A second later she stepped back to the doorway and glared at the little girl who had not moved. She raised her eyebrows in a silent question, but still got no response. “Now, kid, let’s move. Get yourself in here.” She tried not to sound like a drill sergeant but old habits died hard.

Mary Sue swallowed hard and took a small step, feeling the squish of the water leaving her shoe as she did. She’d have to walk about six feet to get to the door and it was all across one of those soft white rugs. That would make a lot of wet, dirty foot prints, not to mention all the water that was dripping off of her. At least, she hoped it was water.

May wasn’t about to ask again. She marched back to the child, slipped her hands under the kid’s arms and held her out in front of her, walking to the large bright bathroom and depositing her on the tile floor. She let out a breath, pushed her hair back and flipped on the water in the biggest bathtub Mary Sue had ever seen. It glugged out loudly and May dumped something from a large bottle into the water that made it get a little quieter. Then she turned and put her hands on her hips again, shook
her head and reached for the child who threw up one arm in self defense. May stopped, mentally kicking herself for once again moving too quickly and too harshly for a kid too used to being knocked around.

“It’s okay,” she spoke softly as she again knelt down in front of the little girl. “I’m just...just...” She didn’t know exactly what she was...angry? Surprised? Frustrated? Confused? How the hell could she explain all of that to this kid? She turned back and leaned over to turn the water off then turned back very slowly.

“Let’s get you out of these things.” She reached to pull the wet t-shirt off the little girl, but stopped when Mary Sue quickly grabbed the same and took a half step back. She looked at May with wide questioning eyes.

May smiled. “Hey, kid you don’t have anything I’ve never seen and you’re not going to peel those soaked things off without help. So, how about we help each other?” She raised her brows in question and waited while the little girl tried to wriggle out of the shirt that stuck like extra skin to her skinny arms, now shriveled with the cold water.

After a few moments and a lot of effort, Mary Sue stopped and asked for help with only a glance. May nodded and pulled the arms and neck openings wider with a gentle tug then wrestled the shirt over the child’s head. The grayish camisole followed. May took a quick breath at the sight of the child’s ribs that should not be as pronounced as they were. What the hell? Didn’t they feed these kids?

She swallowed her renewed anger and smiled as she lifted the child to sit on the closed toilet seat. She untied her shoes and slipped them off, staring at the mismatched socks underneath. One barely reached the girl’s ankle and was bright orange with blue stripes. The other was at least a size too big and dark with a hole in the heel as well as the ball of the foot. May stretched them wide and pulled both off adding them to the pile.

“I’m s-sorry ‘bout the shoes.” Mary Sue shivered with her arms wrapped around her middle. “T-the m-marker got all r-r-runny in in the r-r-rain.” Her teeth chattered as she tried to explain.

May shook her head as she helped the child stand. “I’ve got something to fix that.” She winked as she slipped the light cotton slacks over her nonexistent hips and wrestled them off, leaving the faded, off color, frayed panties in place. She noticed for the first time the long gash along the child’s thigh that matched the tear in the pants. She looked at it with concern. It was not deep enough for stitches, but it was nasty.
Mary Sue leaned over to look as well. “I g-got c-c-caught, w-w-w-when I climbed on on the d-d-dumpster. It w-w-w-as sha-sharp.” She drew a sharp breath through her chattering teeth.

May could not even imagine what kind of nastiness could have transferred from a dumpster used by gawd knows who or for what. At least the rain had washed it clean…if the rain was even clean. It didn’t matter because she intended to soak this kid until she sparkled. Of course that meant removing that last article of clothing. She took a deep breath and rested her hands on her own thighs.

As if the child understood, she sighed. Mary Sue knew she’d had at least one ‘accident’, maybe more than one while she was out on that window. The first happened when she slipped off the wet dumpster and scraped her leg. It just happened because she couldn’t stop it. The second time was when May banged on the window real hard and she knew the warm water on her legs was not rain. She sniffled once then pushed her fingers under the weak elastic band on her waist. The undies didn’t exactly slide down. They more rolled into a band and fell in a plop at her feet. She bent quickly and snatched them so May wouldn’t have to touch them. Sr. Regina said that was disgusting when it happened last year.

It was an accident. She just waited too long and then Polly wouldn’t unlock the door and she didn’t mean to go on the hall floor. Sr. Regina made her mop it twice and spray it with something that made her cough for a long time. Then she had to change herself while Sr. Regina watched, but didn’t help. She made her throw away her clothes and put on one of those diaper pants things that the toddlers wore, but that was after she whacked her bare bottom a couple times. Polly was there too and she laughed for a long time and told all the other kids what happened. Everybody laughed at her all week cuz they knew she had to wear those dumb diaper pants things until Sr. Regina said she could have underwear again. Polly was in charge of making sure she did and made her go to the lavatory every twenty minutes. Sister said she’d get two whacks for every accident. She didn’t have any but Polly lied and told the nun she did…twice. So she got two whacks two times and had to wear the dumb pants two more weeks. Then Sister Stephanie came back from visiting her mother and made it stop.

She hoped May wouldn’t tell on her.

May tried not to stare at the fading bruises on the child. She smiled and lifted the little girl into the large tub seeing the long yellowish green bruise across her backside for the first time.

She was going to hurt that nun.

Mary Sue eased herself down into a cloud of wonderful smelling bubbles and the warmest water she’d ever felt. The gash on her side stung but she didn’t care, the water made her cold body feel better as soon as it touched her skin. She sat bolt upright in the center of the tub but slowly relaxed and let herself run her hands through the soft water and mounds of bubbles.
May let out a breath and ran a hand through her hair. She let out a fluttery breath then turned and picked up the sodden mess on the floor with just her finger and thumb. She dropped what might have once been considered clothing into the waste basket and set the small wet sneakers on top then turned back to the little girl.

“You stay right there. Do not even attempt to get out until I come back. Got it?” She commanded gently.

Mary Sue nodded.

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May moved to the laundry room, took one look at the mess in the waste basket and dumped it into the trash. She turned up her nose at the odor, pulled the bag from the can and made a quick trip to the back hall to deposit it in the incinerator chute. Once back inside she filled a small basin with warm water, added some of that oxidized powder and dropped the sneakers in to soak. She drummed her fingers on the top of the washer.

“Now what?” She asked herself, out loud. The kid couldn’t stay in the tub all night and she certainly couldn’t go stark naked. Her mind spun with all she needed and what she had to do. “Damn!” she spit as she pulled her phone from her pocket and opened the message app. She poked the number she needed and waited for the call to be answered.

Sr. Stephanie’s voice was calm but May could hear the anxiety she tried to hide. “May,” the woman breathed. “Mary Sue has gone missing. I’ve called the police but I don’t have any idea where to tell them to start. She’s been gone all day and now this storm. I thought maybe she might try to go back to where you two spent the day and…”

“I’ve got her.” May interrupted, silencing the woman.

“She’s with you?” The nun’s voice was a combination of relief and confusion.

“Let’s just say, I found her about twenty minutes ago.” May started to explain.

“Thank the Lord,” Sr. Stephanie had tears in her voice. “Is she hurt? I will wake Father Simon and come for her right now. Thank you, May. I am so sorry for this situation. I assure you it will not
“She’s wet and cold and probably hungry. I’ve got her soaking in a warm tub.” May assured her. “It’s almost ten, Sister. By the time you get here and back it will be after midnight. This storm has everything running slowly. I’ll keep her for the night and bring her to you in the morning.” She stopped for a moment then added. “I’d still like a word with Regina.” She grit her teeth saying the name.

“I cannot put that responsibility on you, May. It is highly irregular. I’m sure Father will not…”

“There’s no problem,” May insisted. “She’s already here and there’s no reason any of us need to go out in this. She’s warm and safe.” May meant that in more ways than one. Who knew what waited for that little kid if she was left with those crazy women.

Sr. Stephanie hesitated, letting the conversation fall silent for a few seconds before she agreed. She would contact the police and let them know Mary Sue was safe. There would be forms to file and questions to answer, but for now she was satisfied all was well. May was right it was a long trip across town and back and it was late. The best thing for all of them was to let the child stay where she was and sort things out in the morning.

May hung up the phone and let out a sigh of relief…one relief. She immediately jabbed another number into the phone and waited the few seconds for an answer.

“Piper,” she barked then continued without waiting for a reply. “I need you to go to one of those stores that sell everything and stays open all night.”

“Okay,” the voice came back confused but alert. “Is there a problem.”

“I need you to pick up a couple pair of little girl’s jeans and some of those shirts kids wear and a couple packs of girls underwear – tops and bottoms. And socks, however they sell them, a few packs of those too. And pajamas or nightgowns or something kids wear to bed.” May rambled off rapidly.

“Okay,” Piper answered again, now clearly confused but knew enough not to ask when May gave an order. “What size?” She asked slowly.
“Size?” Now May sounded confused. She let out a breath through her nose. Size? How the hell should she know what size?

“Yeah, how big?” Piper resisted the urge to ask why May, a single no family no attachment woman, suddenly had a need for children’s clothing. “Any size?” She tried. Maybe it was some kind of charity thing.

“Small,” May answered back. “Probably size eight, is that a size?” May wasn’t sure. She never purchased kids stuff. “I don’t know get a couple sixes and some eights. I think ten is too big. Yeah, sixes and eights.”

“Okay,” Piper repeated. “They’ll be here when you return.”

“No!” May answered quickly. “No, I need you to go now and bring them here as soon as possible.”

“Now?” Piper almost squeaked. “Right now?”

“Now,” May repeated. “Go.” With that word she hung up and set the phone on the kitchen table then picked up her very strong, luke warm tea and drank it all in one sip.

xx

Mary Sue sat at the kitchen table wrapped in two large towels. May had come back to the bathroom and helped her scrub clean then washed her hair twice with shampoo that didn’t smell like the same stuff you clean the dishes with, but more like flowers. She told the little girl it was jasmine and lavender and it would make her hair soft and shiny. May was very careful not to get soap in her eyes. She let the dirty water drain out of the tub then filled it again with very warm water and let Mary Sue soak some more. When she held up a big white towel, the little girl stood and allowed her to lift her out of the very big tub.

May patted her dry. She didn’t rub hard and almost knock her down like the big girls did when they helped with bath time. She rubbed her hair gently, too. The only bad part was when she put medicine on the big cut on her leg. It stung bad, but May blew cool breath on it and told her it would only sting for a bit. Then she put more medicine on that didn’t sting and wrapped a bandage around her leg so it would stay there.
She dried her hair with a real hairdryer and wrapped her in two big dry towels. One went around her chest twice then tucked in behind her. The other, May put over her shoulders like a shawl. After that she scooped her up in arms and started for the kitchen.

“I could walk.” Mary Sue said, but she secretly wished May wouldn’t put her down.

The woman shook her head. “Your feet are clean and the floor is cold. Let’s keep them apart.” She smiled and carried her all the way to the kitchen then set her down on one of the chairs at the table. There was a small bowl of soup and a cup of tea. Both had steamy swirls drifting up from them.

Mary Sue looked at both then up at May.

“I know it’s late, but you need to warm up the inside of you before you go to bed.” She nodded toward the bowl as she handed Mary Sue a spoon. “And that tea is a special recipe my Baba uses to keep the sniffles away.”

Mary Sue looked at the spoon for a second then took a small taste of the soup she hoped didn’t taste like fish. She smiled and took a full spoon taste. It was chicken with rice, lots of rice not just a little bit like at St. Agnes. It had carrots and chunks of chicken too. She took a few more spoons full, set the spoon down and tasted the tea laced with an extra dollop of honey. She swallowed, wiped her mouth with the napkin May had set on the table and sat back on her chair.

“I ain’t got no clothes.” She could see her back pack on top of the washer from where she sat. “They’s all wet. I gotta wait til they dry?”

“About that kid,” May paused as she sat next to the child with a fresh cup of her own tea. “I couldn’t save them. They were too far gone.”

Mary Sue blinked a few times, swallowed and looked at the soup for a second before responding. “I can’t go back naked. I’m already gonna get punished real bad. If I ain’t got no clothes…” She just shook her head.

May took a deep breath and let her hand drop on the table. This kid talked about getting punished like she just expected it, like it was supposed to be part of her everyday routine. Mary Sue mistook the reaction for anger. She dropped her head to her chest and her hands to her lap.
“You gonna hit me now?” She sighed heavily.

May stood and moved to the child’s side, squatting down next to her. She turned the little girl to face her and looked into her eyes. “Listen kid, what you did was pretty stupid and gawd knows what could have happened. My momma would have spanked my butt purple,” she took a breath as Mary Sue let out a sigh and nodded in agreement. May took the child’s hand in her own and rubbed her thumb over the small palm. “But no, kid I am not going to hit you. I think…” She wanted to say she believed the little girl had enough hits, but stopped herself. “You don’t need to worry about that.” She smiled then grew serious. “But, don’t you ever, EVER pull a stunt like that again or I might just pull a momma on you. Got it?” She smiled again and tapped the little girl’s nose, causing her to blink. “Finish your soup,” she pointed toward the bowl as she stood.

Mary Sue turned, picked up her spoon and continued to eat as the doorbell chimed and May moved to answer it.

xx

“Hey, boss,” Piper whispered as she handed May the first of several large bags. “You didn’t specify how many so I got five of each.”

“Thank you, Piper.” May actually smiled but did not open the door to admit the other woman.

“You’re not going to tell me what this is all about, are you?” Piper smiled as she passed the last two bags through the slightly open door.

“Good night, Piper,” May glared. “Thanks again,” she eased the door closed then collected as many bags as she could carry and moved to the kitchen.

It took three more trips to get all of them to the bedroom.

xx

By midnight, Mary Sue was clad in brand new right out of the package Little Mermaid undies, a starch white camisole and pajamas that fit. They had real colors and no holes and they smelled fresh. The pants were all colored stripes and the top had a goofy character with orange hair that poked right up straight. May didn’t know what it was called and they both laughed at the silliness of
May led her back into the room where she’d slept by the outside window. She drew the blinds and made the room look smaller and quieter then she pulled down the blankets and the sheet so Mary Sue could climb in with just a nudge of encouragement. She waited until the little girl got comfortable on the fluffy pillows then tucked the blankets around her. May sat on the edge of the bed for a second then held up one finger and hurried out of the room. When she returned she held out a small soft Panda to the little girl.

“Maybe you need a friend for company. I know you don’t usually sleep alone.” May smiled as the child took the toy and set it on the pillow next to her.

The sight actually hurt. This kid didn’t even know how to snuggle with a stuffed toy. She didn’t even attempt to use it for comfort. Hell, this kid probably didn’t even know what comfort was. May took the toy back with no reaction from the child, who merely stared. “It’s okay, he won’t break. You could hug him a bit. He’s pretty soft and well, he doesn’t get a lot of hugs.”

The little girl blinked at the silliness of that. It was a toy. It didn’t have feelings, but it was soft and when May squeezed it, it made a noise like Father Simon’s big fat cat. She hesitated when May held it back out to her then took it and with a little look from the woman gave it a little hug. It was softer than she thought and it tickled her nose, but she rubbed her face against the soft fur and hugged a bit tighter. It made the noise again and the little girl smiled.

“That’s supposed to be a growl, but he’s pretty tame.” May teased, evoking another smile that turned into a yawn. She walked across the room and turned on a small light then turned back. “Okay, kid it’s time you got some sleep. You’ve had a hell of a day and…and…” She looked into those dark eyes that were just hanging on her every word. “And we’ll deal with everything else tomorrow.”

Mary Sue took in all the feels and smells of this room and this bed. It smelled like outside in the fresh air and the blanket didn’t scratch because there was a sheet between it and her skin and it felt so soft she just wanted to feel it with her bare toes. The pillows were soft and didn’t sink down flat and there were no bumps under her, just a mattress that felt just right.

May walked back, sat on the bed again and watched her for a moment before once again tucking the blankets around her. She let her imagination wander for just a second. How different could her life be with this…no she wouldn’t go there…?

“You know we have a lot to talk about in the morning.” She said calmly. The little girl nodded with
a slight frown. “There’s going to be a lot of questions you’ll need to answer and Sr. Stephanie is probably not going to be very happy.”

Mary Sue shook her head and hugged the panda tighter.

“You know I have to take you back.” May said without looking at the little girl and felt her nod her understanding. The woman took a breath as the child yawned again. “Okay, you get some sleep and maybe we’ll see if Carl’s has those pancakes you like before we go back.”

A smile spread over the little girl’s face as she curled into a ball and cuddled the panda. May stood and looked at her for a moment before quickly placing a soft kiss on her temple. Mary Sue smiled without opening her eyes and was asleep before May crossed the room and turned out the light.

She left the door open.

May slept on the sofa, just in case the little girl woke in the middle of the night.
Chapter Summary

Mary Sue wakes up in May’s apartment
It’s time to tell May what happened and the little girl has a few confessions to make
Her clothes are gone and her shoes are still wet
May has plans for a certain nun

Mary Sue blinked a few times before coming fully awake. She smiled at the black and white fuzzy bear that lay a few inches from her face and snuggled once again into the soft, warm bed. In all the foster places she’d been, she’d never slept in a bed like this. The room was still dim in the early morning hour, but the little light that May had turned on was still shining.

The little girl sat up and dangled her legs over the side of the bed, emitting a soft giggle at the fact they did not reach the floor. In fact it was almost a foot drop to the fuzzy carpet below. Her bed at the orphanage was not this high. She didn’t even have to stretch to reach the floor there. She ran her hand across the mattress noticing how much thicker it was than the one on the small bed where she usually slept. Mary Sue scrunched up her toes in anticipation of the feel that carpet would have on her still warm feet. She slipped forward and landed softly, without making a sound, something she could never do on the creaky cold floors of St. Agnes. The old building wasn’t really bad it was just …old. It creaked and crackled like anything that was that old.

Mary Sue didn’t walk to the bathroom. She slid her bare feet across the soft, fluffy rug almost like skiing on fabric snow. A small crackly snap bit her hand as she laid it on the brass knob. Even that brought a smile to her face. She hurried to take care of an urgent call from nature then paused in front of the large sink contemplating how to wash her hands. On her tip toes she could barely stretch her arms into the sink and could not reach the faucet. For a moment she considered using the great big bathtub, but the water came out very fast and she wasn’t sure she could turn it off, if she could turn it on. The resourceful child found her answer in a small decorative basket of hand towels set on a small table in the corner of the room. She carefully placed the towels on the closed toilet seat, inverted the basket and stood on it. It was a bit picky on her bare feet but it was the perfect fit. She scrubbed her hands with soap that smelled like the stuff you put in cake to make it taste vanilla, pushed off the water and stepped back to the tile floor. After drying her hands she replaced the basket and the towels. They didn’t look as neat as they did before she moved them but they weren’t too worse for wear.

The little girl carefully closed the bathroom door and ‘skied’ back across the bedroom carpet. She wasn’t really sure what to do next. At St. Agnes she would have to dress, make her bed, grab her
back pack and be in the dining hall before the breakfast bell sounded. Mary Sue was pretty sure May did not have a breakfast bell and she was positive she couldn’t get dressed because May threw away her clothes. She said they were ‘too far gone’. Mary Sue thought that meant something bad since May didn’t give them back. For a moment her cheeks burned with embarrassment. She remembered the ‘accidents’ she had the night before.

Accidents! More than one! Her clothes must have been disgusting…that’s what Sr. Regina would say and she’d make her throw them away. Mary Sue wondered if May would make her throw them away from where they were gone too far. Maybe May already called St. Agnes and told Sr. Regina what happened and she was coming with those horrible diaper pants and more clothes to take her back.

Suddenly, Mary Sue felt kind of sick. It was a weird sick, not the kind where you needed medicine or wanted to throw up, but just prickly all over. She wanted to breathe fast. No, she wanted to climb back into that big bed and pull herself under the sheets and blankets and just melt into the mattress. She wanted to run as far away as she could, but that wouldn’t be far with no clothes and no shoes. She was overwhelmed with feeling she couldn’t control nor understand so she stiffened her body and rolled her little hands into tight fists, breathing through her teeth with her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Sr. Regina called it her ‘look of absolute obstinate defiance’ which usually earned her two or three good solid smacks on the backside before she got dragged to the office for serious discipline. Most of the time, the little girl, didn’t even remember what happened until she found herself lying on her bed nursing a very sore behind.

“Good morning,” May’s voice came around a yawn as she leaned against the bedroom door frame. “Didn’t think you’d be up this early,” she smiled although the little girl did not turn to greet her.

Mary Sue didn’t hear May. She was breathing in quick gasps, staring at nothing…it was just easier not to deal when there was just so much to deal with.

May watched for a second. The child’s fists clenched and unclenched, her body was tense and stiff and her breathing was a lot like that little squirrel her father had trapped and placed in a large cardboard box. ‘Damn,’ she thought as she stood straight. What the hell? What if the kid is having some kind of seizure?

The woman had plenty of training in first aid and field medicine but none of that pertained to kids. She ran through a list of associates that might have an answer but contacting any of them would mean she’d have to reveal the fact that she had gone soft on some needy little waif….and that…that… She couldn’t finish the thought. Instead she stepped into the room.

Moving quickly to face the child, she dropped to her knees. “Hey, kid,” May nervously smiled. “You okay?”
Mary Sue blew deep breaths in and out of puffed cheeks. She stared into May’s eyes but did not see her.

May recognized the look—panic, terror, shock—she’d seen in on victim’s faces…those she’d rescued, those who’d seen too much for their minds to handle. She blinked away a tear and took the little girl’s tight fists into her hands.

“Hey, kid…it’s okay…you’re okay.” She assured the child who did not react. May drew a deep breath. She had no idea what to do…how to help. “Come on, kid, you’re scaring me.” At that she laughed through her nose. “And it takes a lot to scare me.”

Mary Sue still did not react, other than to close her eyes again.

“Okay…” May hedged. “You need to calm down, kid…relax…” She rubbed her hands up and down the child’s tense arms, feeling the stiff little bones tighten at her touch. “It’s okay,” she whispered softly. “I’m not going to hurt you, Mary Sue. You’re safe here.” She continued gently rubbing those tight little arms up and down, slowly drawing deep breaths in tandem with her movements. “Look kid, you need to breathe, just breathe through it…I promise it will be okay.”

Taking the little girl’s fists she placed them on her chest and laid her palms gently over them. “Just breathe, Mary Sue, breathe with me…just like this…feel me breathe and do it with me…” She pressed the little fists slightly harder and drew a deep breath…then another…and another. May wasn’t really sure how many times she drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, she wasn’t really counting but slowly the child’s breathing eased into the same rhythm. Deeply in…slowly out…in through the nose…out with a long blow through the lips. Again, she didn’t count the minutes it took, but the little fists relaxed and two rough little palms rested against her chest.

The little girl blinked a few times as her face crumbled and her lip quivered. If May hadn’t been holding her hands she would have pulled them back, but she merely stood and once again stared into the woman’s face. This time looking deep into the dark eyes that so resembled her own…seeing something she’d been searching for…something so close and still so very distant.

“May,” the little girl’s voice was nothing more than a hoarse whisper.

Breathing a sigh of relief, May dropped one hand and used it to brush the hairs from the child’s face. “You scared me kid.” She exhaled with a smile.
May Sue took a shaky step but was caught as May stood. She swung the child back to the bed and sat next to her, with an arm around her shoulders for support. Mary Sue looked down at her feet, once again a foot from the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean it.” She shook her head slowly and peeked up at May. “I didn’t mean to be assalute obfiance.”

May blinked a few times. There was no translation for whatever the hell those bitches accused this child of doing. “Everyone gets scared, kid. Sometimes you get so scared your body just shuts down so you don’t have to deal with it.” She mentally, rolled her eyes at how stupid that sounded, but the little girl was nodding as if she understood.

“If I think too much it gets all mixed up and makes me feel picky all inside cuz I ain’t got no place ta hide where it can’t get me.” Mary Sue tried to explain. “It don’t happen all the time,” she added quickly.

“Were you thinking too much before I came in?” May asked quietly, pulling the child closer.

Mary Sue nodded.

After waiting a few seconds, May asked. “Do you want to talk about it?”

The child shook her head slowly, once again staring at the floor. “I just be bad so much I forget and it means I get punished. I don’t mean it but I can’t make it stop sometimes.”

Most of that was a long mumble, but May understood enough. “Everybody has bad days, kid.” She smiled, thinking about some of the bad days she’d had and the people that had suffered because of it.

Shaking her head, Mary Sue sat up straight and lightly stroked the rainbow pattern on her PJ pants. “Sister says I got the devil in me, that’s why I always be so bad.”

“Hey!” May spoke quickly, ignoring the little girl’s jump at the sound. She took Mary Sue’s shoulders and turned her to face her. “Look at me, kid.” She ordered and waited a few seconds for the child to comply. She bit back the guilt at the fear that looked back at her. “You are not bad and
there is no devil in you. That’s not possible. The devil is…” She stopped herself. This was no

time for a philosophical debate on religious dogma…especially with a distraught eight year old. She
took a breath and again put an arm around the child’s shoulders, drawing closer. “You’ve got a lot

of spirit kid, and you’re brave as hell, you climbed all the way up that wet fire escape.” May

squeezed her a little tighter and tried to make light of the whole thing. This was not something she

was going to fix, but for now it seemed to have passed.

“Are you gonna take me back now?” Mary Sue asked in a small voice. “Is Sister bringin’ me some
clothes cuz you said you goned mine.”

May wriggled her eyebrows as the child looked up at her. “Nobody is bringin’ you clothes.” She

shook her head with a fake frown. Mary Sue gave a little nod and a soft sigh. “But I’ve got some

here and you can just pick what you like. But, first let’s have a nice hot cup of tea and talk about

what happened yesterday.”

Mary Sue sighed again, chewed her lip and gave an almost imperceptible nod. May stood and held

out her hand. The child looked at it for a moment then slipped her own hand into it and followed

Mary to the kitchen.

xx

Mary Sue sipped the very sweet hot tea May gave to her in a real china teacup. It was white with

little pink flowers and a matching saucer. She even let her add as much honey as she wanted and
didn’t warn her about spilling or breaking. The little girl was extra careful not to stir it too hard or

pick it up too far from the saucer. There was a kettle on the table that matched the cups. May

explained how she didn’t like the tea that came in those little paper bag things. She had little metal

boxes with funny writing on the sides. Mary Sue was a very poor reader but she knew enough to

know those were not alphabet letters on the tins. May told her it was Chinese figures and that her

father had drawn them on the can and given them to her for her birthday. Mary Sue smiled when

May called her father, ‘Baba’. May said that meant ‘daddy’ in Mandarin.

May told her it was Rishi Tea and Mary Sue was amazed at the red color. She’d never had red tea…

well, except for last night she’d never had any tea. Kids weren’t allowed to have it at St. Agnes. At

meal times there was always milk, but other than that they just had water. The Sisters drank tea but

they did use those little tea bags not stuff like May had. To Mary Sue it looked like little sticks and

leaves that you could pick up anywhere on the ground.

They just sat and sipped their tea for a little while. Mary Sue looked at anything except May whom

she knew was looking right at her…waiting. She sipped her tea again and spied her sneakers atop

the washing machine. She smiled at how they once again looked brand new. The red stain was
gone.
“They’re still wet.” May smiled, following the child’s line of vision. “I don’t think the dryer would be good for them and the noise is really not something either of us need.”

Mary Sue shook her head and picked at the napkin May had set next to the saucer in front of her. “I didn’t run away…” she started. She looked up quickly and then back down.

May took a sip of tea, nodded and set it down. “It’s a good start. I’m listening.”

The little girl took a deep breath, raised her shoulders and lowered them slowly before continuing.

xx

Mary Sue explained how she’d left St. Agnes the day before and how important it was to find her really real parents. She told May the other kids were talking about Sr. Stephanie going to a meeting at the social place and that meant somebody was going to a foster place. The little girl swallowed hard and shook her head telling May she didn’t like foster places and hoped it wasn’t her turn again.

Hanging her head she told May about taking the money from the poor box, cuz her hand just fit into the slot and it was the easiest place to get money if you really, really needed it. Before May could respond to the child’s confession the little girl explained she really, really did need it to get to where the big building were that all the people came to see. Maybe her parents were visiting when they lost her and came back to look like all those other people.

Mary shook her head and explained that stealing was never a good idea. Mary Sue agreed and told May all about Moses and his big stone book that had those laws you’re not supposed to ever break or you make a sin and have to tell Fr. Simon. The little girl let out a long breath.

“Sr. Regina says penance ain’t nuff. She says you need somethin’ to remember.” She shook her head. “I think I did lotsa sins and I’m gonna hafta remember a awful lot. She’s gonna be real mad at me for all of them.” Mary Sue sighed.

May grit her teeth so tightly she felt them pierce her tongue on one side.

Mary Sue told May about the homeless people and the breakfast truck. She shook her head when
she told her about the man with the Asian wife who was going to have a baby and how he thought St. Agnes was a nice place. She mentioned all the people she ran into and spoke to and watched but was sure she had not seen her parents in all of those crowds. Then the storm came and everyone scattered and she ran back to the subway and missed the stop and went to the shoe store and the man at the door wouldn’t let her in and she didn’t know how to get back to St. Agnes and only had seventy two cents.

May nodded. The change had fallen from the little girl’s jacket. May collected it from the floor and dropped into a small glass dish on the table in the foyer.

“I gotta put it back inna poor box.” Mary Sue explained with wide eyes. “Then I gotta pay all the other money back too. I think it was about a hundred dollars.”

May smiled and tapped one finger on the table top. “I don’t think it was that much, but we’ll make sure it gets back where it belongs. I think if we put it back it will make up for taking it and nobody will need to know.”

Mary Sue krinkled up her face and leaned her head to one side. “God’ll know. He knows everything.” She remarked as if May really should already know.

Pursing her lips, May nodded. “Yes, He will and he will know you put it back. God forgives everything. Doesn’t he?”

The little girl nodded. “But ya gotta tell you’re sorry.”

“Are you?” May asked quietly, without accusation.

“Is it enough?” Mary Sue whispered.

May pictured her hands around that nun’s throat, throttling her for the maltreatment of this child. She wondered if she was just as cruel to every child or just had it in for this little one. Maybe the woman had some sort of bias against biracial children or Asian people in general. Maybe she was just a mean, ornery bitch that needed a good dose of the ‘fear of God’…or better yet the ‘fear of May’.

“It is definitely enough.” May assured the little girl. After a few silent moments she urged the child to explain how she ended up on her window sill.
Mary Sue shrugged her shoulders. She explained how she wanted to see if May was home because she could help her get back to St. Agnes. She used a pile of boxes to climb on the dumpster, but they broke and she fell. That was how she cut her leg. She patted the area on her thigh that hurt a bit more now than it had when she was so cold the night before. May recognized the look.

“We’re going to have a look at that cut before you get dressed. I think a little more medicine and a new bandage will help it feel better.” She nodded toward the injured leg.

Mary Sue took a breath and nodded. “Once I got to the top of the dumpster, I just stretched up to get the ladder and climbed up.” She shrugged again and looked into her empty tea cup. “You weren’t home so I waited. I didn’t mean to sleep on your window, but I was tired.”

May nodded as she knit her brows. “You know that was a pretty dangerous and totally stupid stunt, kid. You could have gotten a lot more than a nasty cut on your leg. If you fell…” She let it drop, refusing to even imagine what could have happened on that fire escape. She drew a breath and shook her head. “Look at me, kid.” She gently ordered the little girl who was staring at her own lap as her feet swung under the table. She waited for the child to comply.

Mary Sue looked up slowly, waiting for the bellowing that was sure to come.

May struggled to be serious without being a threat. She looked into the wide, terrified eyes that were clearly waiting to be admonished. She let out a breath and shook her head again. “Promise me you will never, ever pull such a damn stupid stunt again. Will ya, kid?”

Mary Sue chewed her bottom lip and blinked at May several times before giving a tiny nod.

“A real promise, Mary Sue.” May insisted as she slowly extended her hand. “Shake on it?”

The little girl stared at the hand for a moment before placing her own on top and allowing May to gently move it up and down. While still holding the little hand May continued. “That makes it a done deal, kid. It’s a promise you can’t break.” May nodded at the little girl’s raised eyebrows. “But if you get any crazy ideas…and you do…” She shook her head, stopped shaking the hand and placed it between both of hers and stared into those big brown eyes for a moment. “If you do…you’re going to have to deal with me…got it?”

Mary Sue nodded, without a smile. She really wasn’t sure what dealing with May would mean, but
she promised and shook hands and it was a deal.

May smiled as she stood, still holding Mary Sue’s hand. She tugged the little girl to her feet. “Okay, let’s go take a look at that cut, get dressed and see if Carl’s has something special on the menu for breakfast.”

A slow smile spread over Mary Sue’s face as she followed May to the bedroom.

xx

May made a really bad face when she took the bandage off Mary Sue’s cut. The little girl had a hard time seeing it because it was more on the back of her thigh than the front. If she twisted her body just right she kinda saw most of it but not really good like up close.

May took out a little white box. She washed the cut again, although Mary Sue wasn’t sure how it could have gotten dirty. Then she put on the stinging medicine that made the little girl draw quick breaths through her teeth and bunch her toes into little foot fists. May blew cool breaths on it but it still stung. All the while she spoke to the little girl about Carl’s and new clothes and her sneakers drying and anything that might take her mind off what was happening. Next came the slippery medicine that made the sting stop and then a new bandage.

A few minutes later the little girl was clad in brand new still really blue jeans that fit without a belt or a pin to hold them up. They didn’t feel so tight she couldn’t bend her legs to sit and they weren’t so loose she had to hold them from falling past her bottom. She chose a blue shirt with two puppies in a basket. May told her it said ‘Puppy Love’ and she repeated the words. There were brand new socks, too. They had no holes and fit her whole foot. She put them on and held out her feet to admire the fit then frowned. She had no shoes to put over them.

May sat on the bed next to her and admired the socks as well. She noticed the sudden frown and smiled to herself. “Hmmm, nice new socks but your shoes are still wet.”

Mary Sue shrugged. “I could take ‘em off and just walk in my piggy toes.”

May nodded. “I guess, but I don’t think that’ll work with the new clothes.” She shook her head. “I do have an idea.” She remarked as she stood and started for the door. “Wait right there.” She disappeared out of the door.
The little girl leaned over to try to see what May was doing, but did not move from the bed. A few minutes later May was back. She held out the red leather sneakers, with red laces and stars stitched into the sides. The little girl’s eyes went wide. They were the sneakers she had caressed at the shoe store, but they were not practical. She could not help the smile that spread across her face.

May didn’t ask if she wanted them, just slipped them on the little girl’s feet.

xx

Breakfast at Carl’s was just as good as last time even though they sat in a different couch table thing that May told Mary Sue was called a booth. This time Millie, the waitress, remembered her name and said there was a different special. That was unless she wanted to read the menu. Mary Sue shook her head and smiled up at May, silently asking permission. With just a look, May agreed and a few minutes later the little girl was staring wide eyed at a two egg omelet, hash browns, bacon, and a hot buttery English muffin. She looked up at Millie and shook her head.

“Is this for everybody?”

The waitress chuckled. “No, sweetie, that is for you. Let the rest of them order their own.” She looked at May with a frustrated glare. “Sure I can’t get you more than just that tea you’re so blasted fond of?”

May smiled and sipped her tea, but declined the offer.

Millie shook her head as she set a tall glass of chocolate milk in front of Mary Sue. “You eat up there, sweet cakes.” She hooked a thumb at May. “Don’t want to end up like this one.” She shook her head with a smile and moved on to her other customers.

Looking at the spread in front of Mary Sue, May realized it had been reduced to a child’s portion but it still seemed an awful lot. “You don’t have to eat all of that, kid.”

Mary Sue already had a mouthful of egg. She smiled broadly, chewed and swallowed. “There’s cheese in these eggs!” She was pleasantly surprised.

May smiled. She was sure the kid would finish every bite.
May confronts the women of St. Agnes

Mary Sue stood with her back against May’s SUV and stared up at the dark brick building that was St. Agnes. May had taken a few steps after helping the child out and closing the car door. She stopped before taking the first step to the large porch. Looking over her shoulder she recognized the fear in the child’s eyes and turned back then squatted in front of her.

“Not scared, are you?” May tilted her head to one side as she tugged at the little girl’s T-shirt gently.

Mary Sue swallowed hard but did not take her eyes off of the building that seemed to be glowering at her. She never really noticed before how the upper windows resembled angry eyes and the porch roof sagged just enough in the right places to look like a growl. She nodded so minutely it was almost imperceptible.

May looked back at the building then turned to the child. “Here I was thinking you weren’t afraid of anything, hell you climbed up the side of a building in the rain…in the dark.”

“Sr. Regina weren’t there…” Mary Sue whispered, still staring at the upper windows of the building.

“No…no, she wasn’t,” May agreed as she stood and leaned back against the car next to the child. She looked up at the building wondering what the kid was staring at. They stayed that way for a few minutes before May spoke again. “I suppose we could just stay out here until somebody comes looking.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“She knows I’m here…” Mary Sue whispered then shook her head slowly. “She always knows.”

May shook her head and held out a hand to the child. Mary Sue stared at it for a moment before looking up at May. “My Baba always told me you need to look your fear right in the eye and make it more afraid of you than you are of it.”

“Sr. Regina ain’t never gonna be scared a me.”
Her voice was so small it hurt May to hear it. She pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow as she sized up the little girl standing next to her. “Hmm, maybe not now, but you won’t always be little.”

“It’ll take a long time for me to be big. I ain’t never gonna be strong.” The little girl sighed as she slipped her hand inside of May’s.

“Well, then you just let me be big until you catch up.” May squeezed the cold little hand as they headed up the stairs.

xx

May rang the bell and heard it chime deep inside the building. If someone was coming it would take a few minutes. She smiled down at Mary Sue who stepped back and behind her as the door knob rattled a few times. When the door finally opened, a tall girl with cropped red hair stood holding it. She seemed to have a sneer etched into her face. Taking one look at May she snarled more than smiled and stepped aside to allow her to enter. Mary Sue followed, staying close and still behind her much larger friend.

“Hey, poops,” the older girl snorted. “Oh, I hope Sr. Regina lets me watch you get your skinny little ass blistered.”

May felt the little hand grab hers tighter. She couldn’t believe this scrawny teen had the nerve to talk to this little kid that way, with her standing right there. The girl narrowed her eyes at May, almost daring her to make some kind of move or say something she could argue with just for the sake of arguing. Instead May pulled Mary Sue closer and smiled her best fake smile at the teen.

“I’d like to see Sr. Stephanie.” She said in a voice as calm as she could manage.

The girl crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the edge of the still opened door. “Yeah? Well, people in Hell’d like ice water.” Again she waited for May to respond. When she did not the girl slammed the door with her foot and nodded toward the wooden bench across the wide foyer. “Sr. Stephanie isn’t here. She’s trying to fix all the crap this little piss ant caused. They want to close the whole place cuz of her.” The girl attempted to poke Mary Sue, but May stepped between them and smiled again.

The girl glared at May for a moment before continuing with a snide smile. “You can see Sr.
Regina. She’s in charge til Sr. Stephanie gets back.” She leaned around May and glared at Mary Sue. “If she comes back.” It sounded more like a threat, meant to scare the little girl even more. “Sr. Regina will take care of everything including what little Mary shoots poop deserves.”

May grit her teeth, back handing this brat would certainly not make a great impression, but the thought of it was almost overpowering. She drew a quick breath. No, she’d save all of her anger for that damn nun. If she thought this kid had the devil in her wait until she saw the hell someone her own size could release. She drew another breath and forced a smile.

“I think we’ll just wait for Sr. Stephanie.” She moved toward the bench, keeping herself between Mary Sue and the obnoxious teen.

The girl shook her head as she crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. “Uh huh, ain’t hapnin. I got my orders and that means I get Sr. Regina, but you can wait here anyhow.” She turned and hurried down the hallway before May could respond.

Mary Sue squeezed herself between May and the arm of the wooden bench, still gripping the woman’s hand tightly. “Sr. Stephanie ain’t here?” She asked, needing May to affirm what Polly had told them. “She ain’t comin back a cuz a me?”

May thumped their hands a few times and smiled. “I’m sure she’ll be here soon. I spoke to her yesterday. She had some paperwork to take care of, but she will be back.” At the little girl’s skeptic look, she added. “I promise.”

Mary Sue stared for a moment. May always kept her promises but it might be a while before Sr. Stephanie came back and until then… The little girl swallowed hard then spoke softly, unable to make eye contact with May. “Will you wait for her with me?” She was afraid to see May shake her head or hear her say she couldn’t stay that long.

“You and I are attached until she gets here.” She held up their hands, still gripped together and shook them gently to show the child. “We talk to her together.” May smiled and felt some of the tension ease from the little girl’s grip.

A door slammed hard in the distance, echoing through the large building and causing Mary Sue to jump. Her grip tightened again.

“She’s coming.” The child whispered as she pulled into May’s side.
The clacking of thick heels down the dark hallway verified the little girl’s statement. May stood as the nun approached with smirking Polly at her heels.

“It is about time you’ve gotten here Mary Sue. You have caused quite a bit of trouble, which is certainly not surprising.” The woman stopped at least six feet from where May stood. She pushed her hands into her wide black sleeves and narrowed her eyes at the child peeking from behind the woman she chose not to acknowledge. Sr. Regina tapped her foot against the slick wooden floor and breathed heavily through her nose.

May glared back, breathing slowly through her nose and out her slightly parted lips in an effort to still her rapidly beating heart. Fury was fueling every fiber of her being, except for the hand that still held that little child’s.

The nun let out a long exasperated breath and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. Polly sniggered softly, with a hand over her lips. Sr. Regina tapped her foot faster then turned her glare on the little girl once again. “Just how long are you going to make me wait?”

‘Til Hell freezes over…twice.’ May told the woman in her mind, but waited for her to make the first move. She felt Mary Sue start to move and pushed her back with one arm.

Dropping her arms to her side, the nun took one step forward. Polly moved to the side, still smiling like a satisfied Cheshire Cat. Sr. Regina stomped one foot, loudly and point to the floor directly in front of her. “Mary Sue Poots you get over here immediately! Right here on this spot! One… two… Do not make me wait!”

May took a step forward then turned back to the little girl behind her. Placing her hands on the child’s shoulders she looked down, smiled and spoke softly. “You stay right here, understand? Do not move unless I tell you to move.”

Mary Sue looked up at May and nodded slowly. May smiled back then turned and marched directly toward Sr. Regina stopping in the spot the woman still pointed to on the floor. Polly took two steps in reverse, stopping when she bumped the wall.

“Three,” May snarled, staring into the nun’s narrowed eyes.

They faced each other, eye to eye, refusing to back down as the teen and the little girl watched. The
large clock in the foyer ticked loudly exaggerating the silence of the large building supposedly filled with small children.

“It’s awfully quiet in here.” May remarked still staring into the nun’s eyes. “For a place full of kids…”

The nun’s gazed narrowed even further.

“Everyone’s at school…” Polly started then stopped at a quick glare from Sr. Regina.

“Thank you for returning our little delinquent, Miss May. I believe I can handle things from here. She will certainly learn a lesson from her poor choices.”

“Seems there’s been a lot of poor choices around here.” May countered, speaking through her teeth.

“It seems some do not learn their lesson despite the measure of discipline applied.” The nun shot back. “Mary Sue,” she bellowed. “I want you in front of me, now.”

The child stood from the bench where May had left her.

“You stay right there, kid.” May reminded her softly.

Mary Sue hesitated for a moment. She remained in place, but did not sit. Polly sniggered out loud.

“Why’s this one not in school?” May tilted her head toward the teen but did not break eye contact.

“My assistant for the day…” the nun growled.

“So much for poor choices,” May huffed.

“You’re business here is finished Miss May.” The nun spoke through her teeth, emphasizing the
You are doing nothing more than wasting my time and your own. This child is not worth either of our busy schedules but nevertheless her bull headedness must be dealt with harshly. She is my responsibility and I will see to it she is given the attention she deserves.”

May took a breath and could not help the laugh that escaped her. “Let’s get a few things straight, sister.” She did not use the term as a matter of respect. “Who and what I waste my time on is my business. This child is worth a hell of a lot more time than either of us have to give. She’s had more than her share of harsh reality and no one, and I mean no one is giving her any more of your idea of attention.” She drew a deep breath and moved closer to the nun, coming almost nose to nose. “If anyone deserves a bit of bull headed harsh attention it’s you.” She finished the statement with a sharp poke to the nun’s shoulder, knocking her slightly off balance.

For a moment the nun merely stared, almost as if knocked speechless. She drew a long breath and stepped closer to May, who did not back away. “I would thank you to keep your hands to yourself.” She warned. “Or I may have young Polly here phone the local constabulary.”

May leaned forward just enough to force the other woman to step back twice. “That’s the first thing you’ve said that makes any sense, sister. I’m sure the constabulary would be very interested in knowing what kind of abuse you and your cohorts have inflicted on this child and…” She paused and took a quick look around the foyer, stairs and offices. “God knows how many others.”

At that the nun fluffed herself into a full fury, like some weird black bird readying for battle. “God knows we do what is best for every child.” She stepped to one side and pointed at the child who had pulled herself into a tight ball in the corner of the bench. “Even those considered incorrigible and almost impossible to bend into well behaved wanted children.”

It was more than May could take. She grabbed the nun by the upper arm and swung her around toward the office at the end of the dark hallway. “I think you and I might continue this conversation in private.” She shoved the woman so hard she stumbled and would have fallen had it not been for May’s tight grip. They half marched half fell over each other for about ten steps before May pulled the woman to a stop. She turned and glared at Polly, who still stood against the wall. “You too, Cruella, before I kick your skinny ass too.”

Polly hesitated for a beat.

May narrowed her gaze and lowered her tone. “I won’t tell you twice.”

The girl swallowed hard, gave a quick nod and pushed herself from the wall. She backed across the hall and the few steps in front of May and the growling nun then hurried down the hall toward Sr.
Regina’s office door. May marched behind, till urging the nun along.

“You stay right there, Mary Sue. This won’t take long.” She ordered without turning around.

The little girl wrapped her arms around her knees, gave a quick nod and ducked her head behind them.

xx

Polly opened the door at May’s nod then slipped quickly inside. She stepped to the left of the opened door hoping to escape as soon as the crazy woman and Sr. Regina entered. May stopped in the doorway and pushed the nun inside. The woman caught her balance on the large desk a few feet away, turned and opened her mouth to speak. May held up one finger, silencing her for the moment.

“You,” she spoke to Polly, “sit!” She nodded toward a large wooden chair in the corner.

Polly looked to the red-faced nun who gave a quick nod, then sat on the chair reserved for those who had what Sr. Regina referred to as ‘penance to pay’.

May slammed the door with such force it echoed through the entire building. In the foyer, Mary Sue jumped then shook with the sound.

“You have no right…” Sr. Regina squealed with intensity.

May pointed a finger and stepped rapidly to the woman. “No…you have no right, none at all, to inflict the damage I found on that child’s body.” She growled through her teeth.

The nun slid along the edge of the desk separating herself from May and continued until she stood behind it effectively placing a barrier between them. May smiled at the useless gesture. At this point her anger had intensified to the point that she could easily flip the large piece of furniture if need be.

Sr. Regina jammed her finger into the desk as she spoke. “That child does not learn. She insists on defying me and breaking every rule St. Agnes has in place. I have no other choice than to discipline her in the manner which fits her heathen behavior. It is the only thing she understands.” Her voice
rose with every word. “Although I do not see how she can be any other way.”

May drew a breath and slammed both hands on the desk, causing the woman to jump back a few inches. “And what the hell does that mean?”

The nun smiled sarcastically. “I mean how can she know the difference between what is right and what is wrong when the mindless creatures that brought her into this world did not know themselves? What kind of people breed indiscriminately, bringing little half this and half that nobodies into this world. How can anyone expect any of them to amount to anything?”

May could not believe what the woman was saying. How could this woman…in this age…have such a narrow, biased mind? “Please tell me you are not saying what I think you are?” May paused for a moment. “Because she is half Asian she…”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Miss May.” Sr. Regina bit back. “It matters not is she half Asian or half Black or half any other breed. She is not pure. She is not what the Lord had planned for His creation.”

May almost jumped over the desk. “And how the HELL would you know?”

The nun drew a deep breath. “I’ve done this for many years. I have seen the children who move through this establishment and those of mixed parentage are all the same…unruly little vagrants left on doorsteps and alleys because their own families won’t have them. They have no regard for rules and without my form of teaching them to obey they end up wallowing in juvenile detention and then prison with their insistence on breaking the law as well as the rules.” She reached under her desk and withdrew a long wooden paddle and slammed on the desk for emphasis.

May was at her side in an instant. She wrenched the paddle from the nun’s hand and cracked it in half over her knee with a snap that echoed loudly in the small room. Shards of wood scattered across the desk and the floor. Polly drew her legs up in front of her and wrapped her arms around her knees looking now as meek and fearful as the small girl she had left in the hallway. May slammed both halves of the wooden weapon together and pushed them into the nun’s chest forcing her backward against the desk almost lying across it.

“You will never, EVER, lay a hand on that kid again…on any kid again.” With each word she shoved the woman back farther. Then pulled the broken paddle back and slammed one half on either side of the speechless nun.
Sr. Jeremy waddled into the large foyer, anxiously searching for the sound of commotion that should not be coming from the empty building. She wielded her wooden spoon in one hand as she entered the foyer looking toward the front door and barely noticing the small child pressed into the corner of the bench outside Sr. Stephanie’s office. She jumped at the loud crack that came from the office at the end of the hallway then let out a huff and hustled toward it.

She pushed the door open and burst into the room. “What is going on in here?” Her first sight was Polly curled into a ball on the chair Sr. Regina reserved for those who had broken enough rules to earn a long sit session in her office. “Polly!” She exclaimed in disbelief. Then turned toward the desk but only saw the blur that almost knocked her back into the hallway.

“Jeremy,” May spat through her teeth as she grabbed the spoon from the woman and snapped it in two, then four, then tossed the pieces across the floor before she spun the hefty nun in a half circle, depositing her on the chair behind the desk. Regina stood, braced against the edge of the desk.

May was on them in seconds.

The large front door of St. Agnes opened then closed softly. Mary Sue did not raise her head at the sound of someone approaching. She listened to the soft footsteps and knew they stopped directly in front of her.

“Mary Sue,” the voice held a tone of relief, but the child jumped at the soft touch to her shoulder.

Sr. Stephanie withdrew her hand and sat next to the little girl. The shouting from the end of the hall caught her attention. She looked toward it then back at the child on the bench. “Sweetheart, what is it?”

Mary Sue lifted her head. Tears streamed across her cheeks, tears she hadn’t realized she shed. “I’m sorry.” She whispered.

The voices from the end of the hallway grew louder. Sr. Stephanie recognized Sr. Regina but had never heard her sound so incensed. Sr. Jeremy seemed to be involved as well and the third, loudest
voice sounded somewhat familiar but more ferocious than the nun had ever heard…ever.

Sr. Stephanie stood. “What is…”

“I’m sorry,” Mary Sue said again. “I didn’t…”

A loud crash startled both. Sr. Stephanie took the little girl’s hand and tugged her toward Sr. Regina’s office. Mary Sue considered resisting, but this was St. Agnes and Sr. Stephanie was the boss here. May said stay, but Sr. Stephanie got to be in charge now. She hurried to keep in step with the tall nun.

xx

“And you!” May spun toward Polly, marched across the floor and yanked her to her feet. “You so much as look at that kid crooked and I’ll have your skinny ass in a facility a lot less homey than this one.” She shook the girl hard. “Got it?”

Polly nodded quickly.

“I’m sorry I can’t hear your head shaking, Cruella. I want an answer…try using your words.” She shook the girl again.

“Ya…um, yes…got it…” Polly stammered.

“Yes?” May narrowed her eyes.

“Y-yes, m-ma’am…” Polly answered, hoping that was what this crazed woman expected.

“MAY!” Sr. Stephanie’s voice startled Polly and the two nuns looked up from where they had gathered behind the large desk.

May did not respond. She held the girl’s arm and glared into her eyes, daring her to speak.
Sr. Stephanie turned quickly, pushing Mary Sue back into the hallway while blocking the little girl’s view with her body. “May,” she spoke softly. “I think Polly understands. Please let her go and we can talk about this in my office.”

May let out a loud huff and tossed the skinny teen back onto the chair. “I’m finished talking.” She growled then turned toward the two nuns behind the large desk. Taking a breath through her teeth she raised a finger and spat, “either of you two witches…” May smiled and let out an evil chortle. “And I use that term to spare the children because I would certainly refer to you in much less polite terms were it not for the one I suspect is outside the door.” May took three slow steps toward the two nuns who drew back and closer together. “If either of you leave a mark on her, the marks I leave on you will radiate in comparison.” She stormed closer, inching her way around the desk. “And I don’t give a DAMN what costume you throw on to cover up your abusive discipline.” She marched forward with each word until coming nose to nose with Sr. Regina and ignoring whatever Sr. Stephanie was babbling behind her.

May breathed heavily in and out for a moment before pulling herself from the haze of rage. She smiled at the panicked look on the two nuns as she turned and walked away, past Sr. Stephanie and into the hallway. Stopping in front of Mary Sue who stood plastered against the wall, she rested her hands on her hips and looked down at the child. “I thought I told you to stay put.” She sneered as she narrowed her eyes.

Mary Sue nodded slowly as her jar dropped and her eyes widened. May smiled and held out a hand.

“Come on,” she spoke softly. “I think Sr. Stephanie wants to speak to us.”

Mary Sue took the offered hand and walked with May toward the Director’s office. When halfway there, May realized Sr. Stephanie was following quite a bit behind. She leaned down and whispered softly. “I think we’re both in trouble.”

xx

“This situation has gotten out of hand, May.” Sr. Stephanie sighed as she dropped into her chair and motioned for May to sit as well. Mary Sue had been banished to the bench in the hallway once again.

“I agree.” May nodded. “Those two should have been reined in a long time ago.”
Sr. Stephanie shook her head. “I have done my best to explain to all of the Sisters here that corporal punishment is not appropriate.”

May shook her head. “I’m sorry, Sister, but your best is just not good enough.”

“Old habits die hard…” the nun shook her head.

May groaned at the unintentional pun then took a breath. “Have you taken the time to look at the bruises on that child?” She spoke softly but the anger was apparent in her tone as she pointed toward the door. “I have and I never want to see them again. Believe me, if either of them, any one here lays a hand on her, I will know it.”

Sr. Stephanie let out a soft sigh and folded her hands on the desk in front of her. “That will no longer be a worry, May.”

Raising her head, with one brow a bit higher than the other, May asked an unspoken question.

“I spent the morning at Social Services fast tracking a placement for Mary Sue. The couple has been here a few times and after hearing the situation is willing to take the child a few weeks earlier than anticipated. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

May could not believe the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She tried desperately to shake it, knowing this is what the kid needed. She attempted a smile that she could not muster, but managed a nod of agreement.

The nun rose and walked around the desk. “I haven’t told her yet. I was waiting until all of the paperwork was complete. The couple is looking to adopt, this is not a foster placement. It took me a bit to find a biracial couple.”

May nodded, but felt the warmth rise in her cheeks and a lump in her throat seemed to be forcing tears to form in her eyes. She would not allow them to fall, but knew they were there. The feeling was odd, uncomfortable and unwelcome. She tried again to shake it off. “They’re a good couple?” She managed to choke.

“He’s a veterinarian. They have a large farm in rural Pennsylvania.” Sr. Stephanie smiled. “She won’t be so eager or able to roam the streets looking for her parents. I should have told her the truth
long ago, but I never thought it would come to this. She would circle the block a few times and spend her day in the park. I did not believe she would go farther.”

May stood and rubbed her hands up and down against her thighs. She drew a breath and looked away from the nun for a second before speaking. “The woman…she’s Asian?”

Sr. Stephanie shook her head. “No, the veterinarian is actually biracial himself. His mother is Asian.”

May nodded. It was good. Good that Mary Sue would be aware from the nightmare that was this place, good that she would have parents and a home, good that she would be with someone who looked like her. She pulled her anger back into place. Anger was a powerful tool, it consumed every other feeling and trapped them behind its blind fury.

“Don’t think this means I won’t keep my eye on this place or those two.” She tossed her head toward the door.

Sr. Stephanie understood. She nodded. “I will do my best to have Regina and Jeremy transferred somewhere they will not work with youngsters.”

May gave a quick nod then looked toward the door as the large clock in the foyer chimed. “I’ve got to go.” She said, suddenly remembering somewhere she needed to be.

“You will say goodbye to Mary Sue?” Sr. Stephanie remarked as she moved toward the door.

May stood for a moment then let out a breath and gave another quick nod.

xx

Mary Sue stood when the two women exited the office. Something in their faces was different. Something made her stomach feel almost like she wanted to throw up. Something made her feel very scared. When May squatted down in front of her and took her hand, it made the feeling worse. She wanted to slam her hands over her ears and crawl under the bench so May couldn’t talk to her. Sr. Stephanie was looking at her the same way she did when she had to punish her for using real bad words at Polly. She looked from the nun back to May.
“Okay, kid,” May smiled. “This is it, I’ve got to go.” She squeezed the little girl’s hand gently.

“You’re comin’ back?” Mary Sue needed reassurance.

May looked at the small hand in her own. “I don’t know kid. I’ve got a pretty busy job. I’m out a lot.”

The little girl nodded. She didn’t understand a lot about the world, why her mother left her at the church, why she never came back…even why the Sisters were so mean and scary…but she did understand goodbye. She shook her head.

“That’s okay. I kin wait. I won’t do nutthin dumb no more.” She made a large ‘x’ over her chest. “Cross my heart.”

May smiled. “I believe you, kid but I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to wait all the time.”

“But I don’t care. I wait all the time.” Mary Sue explained.

Standing, May wriggled the little girl’s hand a few times before letting it go. “Hey,” she said a little too forcefully. “You keep your nose clean, kid.” She tapped a finger on Mary Sue’s nose. May stepped back then turned toward the door. “I might not be around, but I’ll always be watching.” She said over her shoulder.

Mary Sue took a step to follow but was stopped by Sr. Stephanie’s hand on her shoulder. She looked up at the nun who shook her head slowly. Taking the little girl’s hand in her own she covered it with her opposite hand. “We have a few things to talk about Mary Sue. May has to leave, it’s best to say goodbye now.”

May stopped with her hand on the brass door knob, freezing at the word goodbye. Goodbye was different than so long or see you. Goodbye meant forever.

Mary Sue looked at May’s back and shook her head. Sr. Stephanie patted her hand again. “Are you sure dear, it will make you feel better?”
The little girl looked at the floor and shook her head again.

May closed her eyes and felt the hot tear roll over her cheek. “Goodbye, kid.” She said in a whisper as she pulled open the door and stepped out, closing it with a soft click. She brushed the tear away, hurried down the stairs, jumped in her car and pulled away before the strong pull on her heart led her back inside.

Mary Sue stared at the door for a moment before sniffing back the tears she refused to shed.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

May can’t get a certain kid off her mind
Sr. Stephanie reveals a secret
Mary Sue meets her new family

May aimlessly for blocks, her vision blurred by tears that fell despite her determination to stop them. She drew useless deep breaths and cursed herself for the ridiculous display of emotion. She refused to return home, driving to her office. She pulled into the underground garage, slammed her car door and stormed into the building avoiding eye contact with everyone that moved out of her way as she passed. Once inside the gym she tore off her jacket and threw it across the padded floor then attacked the bag that hung in the center of the room. She punched it until her bare knuckles bled then reverted to kicking until she exhausted herself and fell into a mass of rapid breathing and sweat soaked hair.

Her actions emptied the room of all other agents working out or practicing skills. No one wanted to be paired with the incensed agent. Everyone knew to stay out of her way when she was working through anything. If she needed a sparing partner not one agent was willing to volunteer. May didn’t care. Taking out her lack of emotional control in private was not a problem. Once she stopped shaking, she grabbed her jacket and headed for the showers. The stinging cold water would drive what was left of this ridiculous meltdown into oblivion.

xx

Mary Sue was confused. She fully expected to be severely punished for her escape into the city. She heard the loud voices coming from Sr. Regina’s office but they were too muffled to understand. Once Sr. Stephanie made her stand in the hall outside that office she pressed her hands against her ears as hard as she could and made a little humming noise in her throat so she didn’t have to listen. She thought May was mad at her, but then she smiled but Sr. Stephanie wouldn’t let her into her office, so she just waited. Then May was just…just gone.

Now she was in Sr. Stephanie’s office. Sr. Stephanie never once hit her, never. But she was real mad this time and probably got yelled at by the people who made the nuns go away from St. Agnes. Mary Sue never saw them, but she and the other kids knew somebody else was in charge and decided who would stay and who would go. This time was different. She could feel it.
Sr. Stephanie walked her all the way into the office, even after she closed the door. She still held her hand as she walked to her desk, turned and leaned back against it. The nun looked down at the little girl who was staring at the floor. She frowned for a moment before pulling a smile into place.

“Mary Sue,” her voice was stern but not angry. She waited a few seconds then spoke again, just a bit more forcefully. “Mary Sue, look at me, please.” Again she waited.

“Are ya gonna hit me?” The child mumbled into her own chest.

Sr. Stephanie let out a heavy sigh. “After your very poor choices yesterday, I cannot say you do not deserve to be punished and that is something we will talk about…” She watched the little girl draw a shaky breath and release it, still staring at her red sneakers. “No…no, Mary Sue I am not about to hit you now, or ever.”

“Cuz a May,” the child nodded to herself and shuffled from foot to foot.

“No, Mary Sue, because I do not think it would serve any purpose.” She smiled again and tugged the little girl’s hand that she still held. “I need to talk to you about something very important. And I need you to look at me…please.”

Slowly, Mary Sue blinked up at the nun. One tear trickled from the corner of her eye and ran down the outside of her cheek. She rubbed it away quickly with her arm and nodded.

Sr. Stephanie nodded back. “Okay, let’s sit down and I will tell you about the Bradshaws.”

Mary Sue pulled her hand away and took a few steps back, shaking her head. “No, no I don’t want to…no, I don’t need…no…” She shook her head rapidly. “I’ll be good, I promise. I won’t do nothing bad no more. Sr. Regina can hit me all she wants. I won’t tell nobody. I won’t even cry or make no noise. I promise, I won’t go no place if I don’t tell ya. Please…no…I…”

Sr. Stephanie placed her hands on the little girl’s shoulders and tried shushing her, but the child’s words came so fast she barely heard. Taking Mary Sue by the upper arms, the nun eased her into the large chair and knelt down in front of her. Now, the tears flowed freely as the little girl hiccupped her words faster, protesting any attempt to send her anywhere.

“I don’t wanna know ‘bout the Bradshawns. I don’t like them. I won’t never be bad again. I’ll stay
in my room for a week. I won’t even eat nothin’. I’ll do extra chores, even the bad ones. I’ll…”

“Shhhh,” Sr. Stephanie placed two fingers gently on the little girl’s lips. “Shhhh, Mary Sue.” She pulled a tissue from her pocket and attempted to wipe the child’s face.

Mary Sue tossed her head to the side in protest then stopped and allowed the nun to wipe her tears. She pulled in a quick breath. “I don’t wanna go to no more fosters, please Sr. Stephanie. I promise with all my might, I’ll be good, please, I promise.” More tears…more tissues…more shushing.

Sr. Stephanie shook her head. “No, Mary Sue, no more foster homes. I promise, not this time.” She smiled and pulled yet another tissue, wiping more tears. She rose and squeezed into the large chair with the little girl, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. The little girl shook with her continued sobs. “This time there won’t be any foster parents, Mary Sue.” The nun spoke softly. “The Bradshaws want to adopt you. They want you to stay with them forever.”

“But…” Mary Sue coughed, then took a breath and sniffled until the nun handed her another tissue. She blew her nose and took another breath. “But, what about my real parents…what if they come for me?” She looked up at the nun through bleary eyes.

Sr. Stephanie bit her lip. She’d let this go on much too long, believing the little girl would just give up or realize the truth on her own. She smiled weakly as she brushed the stray hairs from the child’s face. “Sweet heart, your parents…” she hesitated searching for the right words.

Mary Sue dug her palms into her eyes, pushing away the tears, then looked back at the nun expectantly. Those deep brown eyes bore into the nun, waiting for her to reveal what ever it was she was about to say.

“Darling, your parents aren’t looking for you and you won’t find them out there anywhere. I believe they are gone for good.” The nun spoke slowly, hoping the little girl would understand.

Mary Sue shook her head as she wriggled out of Sr. Stephanie’s half embrace and stood facing her. “No, they are looking for me…they just forgot and…” She rolled her hands into little fists and shouted in her tiny voice.

Sr. Stephanie took the little girl’s fists in her hands. “No, dear, people don’t forget their children. You were left here because your mother couldn’t or wouldn’t care for you. No one has ever looked for you, sweet heart. I am so sorry and I am so sorry I let you believe they did.”
The little girl tried to pull away, but the nun held tightly. “No, no, they didn’t just leave me...they’re coming back. They just forgot...they just need me to find them...”

“Mary Sue,” Sr. Stephanie spoke softly over the child’s hysterics. “They aren’t coming back and you are just a little girl. You cannot find them because no one knows who they are.”

“They’ll know me and I’ll know them! They will. They’ll know me!” Mary Sue uselessly struggled to pull herself free.

Sr. Stephanie struggled to contain her own tears. “No dear, they won’t. You are so much bigger now. They won’t know what you look like or that you even survived. You were so very sick we didn’t think you would live, sweet heart. We think…” She hesitated at the harshest part of the tragic truth. “Mary Sue...they left you on those steps because they thought you were dead...the Sisters that found you thought you were gone.”

Mary Sue continued struggling, letting out mewling sounds of frustration, but her struggled weakened as

Sister’s words hit home. She let her arms drop and would have fallen to the floor if the nun did not pull her into an embrace.

Sr. Stephanie held the child until her sobs turned to soft sniffles. She quickly dried her own tears before Mary Sue could see them. They sat listening to the quiet ticking of the small clock on the office wall until the little girl took a deep breath and sat up. She used her arm to wipe away the last of her tears and slid off the nuns lap to stand in front of her.

“Could I go now?” She sniffled without making eye contact.

“Maybe you should have something to eat. You’ve missed lunch.” Sr. Stephanie suggested, suddenly ignoring the situation.

Mary Sue shook her head. “I ain’t hungry. I just wanna...” she paused for a moment. “Do I gotta go to school now?”

“No, dear,” Sr. Stephanie smiled as she took the child’s hand. “It’s almost time for classes to end.”
Mary Sue pulled her hand away quickly. “I just wanna go to my room. I don’t wanna see nobody.”

“I suppose that would be a good idea. You can put all of your belongings together. The Bradshaws will be here early tomorrow morning.” Sr. Stephanie smiled.

The little girl nodded and took a few steps toward the door then stopped. “Am I punished now?” She asked without turning back, still staring at the floor.

“No, sweet heart, you are not being punished. I am trying to help you.” Sr. Stephanie realized the little girl felt being sent to a forever family was punishment. “I want you to be happy, to have a family that will love you.”

Mary Sue took two more steps and placed her hand on the door knob. “I ain’t a sweet heart and I ain’t ever gonna be happy no more forever.” She let out a breath and turned the knob.

“Mary Sue,” Sr. Stephanie called and the little girl stopped. “I am sorry. I never meant for you to get hurt by this.”

Without responding the child pulled open the door, stepped into the hall and closed it with a soft click. She took a few steps across the foyer then broke into a run no stopping until she threw herself onto her small cot and let out what tears she had left.

xx

“What’s up with May?” Coulson remarked as he dropped a dossier on her desk. “She’s storming around downstairs like her ass is on fire.”

Piper picked up the large envelope and shook her head. “She’s been a bit out of character for a couple days. I think she’s got some kind of issue she’s dealing with.”

“We’ll she better work it out. They’ve got us off to Russia on some 0-84 quest. She better get her head on straight, almost cost us last time. If she can’t pull her weight she better let Fury know before we are in the air.”
“I’ll decide who needs to know what,” May growled as she pushed her way between the two agents. “Worry about your own weight, Coulson. That’s enough for you.”

Piper rolled her eyes as Coulson quickly exited the room. “He was just…”

May yanked the dossier out of her hand. “I don’t give a damn.” She snarled as she ripped it open and pulled out the documents. “Russia…with Coulson…damn…” she remarked as she slammed the envelope and documents on Piper’s desk.

“0-900…” Piper began.

“I can read.” May sniped back as she opened a narrow door and pulled out her go bag. She dropped it on the floor as she slammed the door closed. “Get Morse for me,” she ordered the young agent. “I’ve got a job for her and find out everything you can about a half Asian veterinarian just outside of Philly.”

“Morse,” Piper repeated. “Vet’s name?”

“Find out,” May barked.

“I’ll have it on your desk when you get back and I will make sure Morse is here to see you.” Piper nodded.

“I want it within the hour and tell Morse to get her ass here ASAP. No…tell her to meet me in the gym.” May snarled as she grabbed her bag and exited the office.

xx

Sr. Stephanie spent another hour discussing transfers with the diocese office and still another with Regina and Jeremy. They were quick to defend their actions and to blame a small child for all of the trouble that had come to St. Agnes in the past few weeks. She reminded them that they had both been given several warnings and she could no longer make excuses for their failure to amend their ways. Again they stressed the fact that some children understood nothing other than the rod that neither of them had any intention of sparing. In the end they were both given two weeks to get their
affairs in order and be ready for the transfers that would be announced by weeks end. Both nodded and accepted the decision before leaving Sr. Stephanie to deal with Polly who would be moved to a center for teens in an alternate facility across the city.

The nun moved to the dining room as the children filed in for dinner. Sr. Jeremy directed her assistants without the aid of her ever present wooden spoon which was the source of raised eyebrows and whispering around the tables. She noticed the second seat from the end of the table was vacant. After saying grace with the children and making her way around the table to speak with each of them, Sr. Stephanie was assured by three other girls that Mary Sue was in their room and told them she was not hungry. When the children had finished and the table was cleared for homework time, the nun made her way to the kitchen to fetch a small tray.

Sr. Stephanie tapped on the slightly open door before stepping into the last room in the hall. She sighed at the sight of the little girl curled into a tight ball on the cot below the window. A small battered suitcase stood at the foot of the bed with a tattered red backpack leaning against it. She placed the tray on the small table next to the cot.

“I thought you might like something to eat.” She spoke softly.

“I ain’t hungry.” Mary Sue mumbled without turning around.

The nun lowered herself to sit on the small bed. “You should eat something anyway. It might help you feel better.”

Mary Sue wriggled away from the nun. “It won’t.” She sniffled.

“Did you pack everything?” Sr. Stephanie changed the subject.

“I didn’t take nuttin that ain’t mine. You could check.” The little girl sighed.

“I don’t need to check, Mary Sue. I believe you.” The nun smiled.

“You don’t gotta punish me, cuz God already did.” Mary Sue informed the nun.

“Mary Sue,” Sr. Stephanie scolded. “God does not punish people.”
The child rolled over and looked into the nun’s eyes for the first time since their conversation in the office. “He punished Adam and Eve and all them people that got washed away cuz they didn’t get to get on the Ark.”

“That was quite different.” Sr. Stephanie folded her hands on her lap. “He does not punish little girls.”

Mary Sue nodded and brushed away a tear. “Bad ones he does…like me.”

The nun shook her head. “No, Mary Sue, you are not bad and God did not punish you.”

The little girl sighed. “You said if I prayed he would hear me.”

“Yes, swee…Mary Sue, God always hears you.” The nun remembered the little girl did not want to be called sweet heart.

“But he don’t listen too good.” Mary Sue shook her head. “He just seed me be bad and punished me for all the bad stuff.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the coins she still had then held them out and dropped them into the nun’s hand. “I took money from the poor box cuz my hand fits in it.”

Sr. Stephanie looked at the change and bit her bottom lip. “I see.”

“That’s stealin’ and that’s bad. I lied to the people on the subway and at the food truck and that’s bad too. That’s two sins on me.” Mary Sue told the nun.

“Well, yes that is but God always forgives, Mary Sue. You know that from your catechism.” Sr. Stephanie reminded her.

Mary Sue shook her head. “No, he just punished me for it cuz he knows I ain’t good for nothin’ cuz I got the devil in me.”

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Mary Sue shook her head. “No, he just punished me for it cuz he knows I ain’t good for nothin’ cuz I got the devil in me.”

“You are a little girl who made a few mistakes. He understands that and he wants you to have a home and people that love you. That’s how the Bradshaws found us and you.” Sr. Stephanie
“I don’t wanna talk no more, Sister. I’m just tired.” The little girl rolled back to her side.

“How about you put on your nightclothes then?” Sr. Stephanie suggested.

Mary Sue didn’t answer. She scooted to the foot of the bed and climbed off, shed her clothing and pulled a nightgown from the bottom drawer of the dresser. She slipped it on then sat on the floor and untied the shoes May had put on her feet that morning. The lump in her throat was hard to swallow and the tears fell quickly. Pulling off the shoes she placed them together, walked to the bed and waited for the nun to rise before tugging back the blanket and crawling under them.

“Would you like me to pray with you?” Sr. Stephanie smiled.

Mary Sue shook her head as she pulled the blanket to her chin. “I ain’t saying prayers no more, Sister. They don’t work.”

Sr. Stephanie opened her mouth to admonish the child then drew a breath and reached to brush the hair away from the little girl’s face. Mary Sue gently pushed her hand away then rolled to her opposite side.

For a moment Sr. Stephanie felt the child’s pain. “I understand sweet heart.” She whispered softly then walked to the door and turned. “Good night, Mary Sue.”

The little girl did not answer. She waited until she heard the door shut then pulled her pillow from beneath her head and hugged it tightly. It wasn’t as soft and sweet smelling as May’s panda but it was something to hold.

She cried herself to sleep.

xx

Ben and Patricia Bradshaw rang the doorbell of St. Agnes at 7:37 a.m. The couple had arrived in the city the evening before and intended to meet with their soon to be daughter for dinner. Sr.
Stephanie’s call had stopped them. She told them it would be better to wait until morning. Dr. Bradshaw had a practice to run and had to be back in Landsdale before noon. It was a little more than a three hour drive. The couple wanted an early start. With all of the paperwork completed, all they had to do was pick up the little girl and make the drive. They could spend the time getting to know each other and be home in time for lunch.

A young nun opened the door with a smile, inviting the couple to step inside. She greeted them warmly and told them she would summon the Sister they had come to see. As she disappeared into the room just off the foyer they smiled at each other listening to the cacophony of children’s voices as they enjoyed breakfast. Sr. Stephanie appeared and greeted them warmly.

“Dr. and Mrs. Bradshaw,” she reached out and took their hands alternately. “You’re a bit earlier than I expected.”

“Yes,” the very noticeably Asian man smiled. “We have a long drive and wanted to get an early start.”

“We’d like to get Mary Sue home and settled by this afternoon.” Patricia grinned.

Sr. Stephanie smiled. Mary Sue had not come to the dining room for breakfast and the tray in her room had remained untouched. The small suitcase and bag had been brought to the foyer and now rested on the bench in front of the main office.

“If you’d like to make yourselves comfortable I will collect Mary Sue.” The nun tried not to let her anxiety show.

“We can wait if she’d like to finish breakfast.” Dr. Bradshaw informed her. The smell of eggs and bacon permeated the large building.

“I weren’t hungry.” A small voice came from the top of the stairs causing all three adults to turn in that direction.

Mary Sue descended the stairs clad in a faded and stained t-shirt and jeans slightly too big with holes in both knees. She wore a pair of slip on sneakers without socks. Sr. Stephanie closed her eyes and drew a deep breath as the little girl reached the bottom and walked toward them.
“Mary Sue,” she smiled as she placed her hands on the girl’s shoulders and faced the Bradshaws. “Maybe we can find you something more appropriate to wear.”

Patricia smiled as she bent to the little girl’s level. “Don’t worry about it, Sister. We’ll be home with plenty of time to do some shopping.” She turned to the child. “Hello, Mary Sue.” She smiled genuinely. “Such a pretty name, just like my grandmother.”

Mary Sue smiled a tiny smile. She looked up at the man with dark hair and eyes just like hers. She sighed. They weren’t the people she would have thought were her parents. Dad’s were supposed to be not Asian, just moms…and May. She didn’t want to think about May but she couldn’t help it. She dreamed about her last night…about the big rock and the sky and the clouds. But it was just a dream.

“Would you like to have breakfast before you leave?” Mrs. Bradshaw was asking.

Mary Sue shook her head. “Them’s mine.” She pointed at the suitcase and backpack. “They ain’t heavy. I kin carry them.” She pulled away from the nun and headed for the bags.

Dr. Bradshaw beat her to them. “Not a problem, sweetie. I’ll take care of these.” He tucked the small suitcase under one arm and wrapped his hand around the straps of the backpack.

Mary Sue shrugged her shoulders and walked toward the door. “Bye, Sister.” She gave a halfhearted wave and reached for the knob.

“Guess you’re anxious to get on the road, huh?” Dr. Bradshaw laughed as he put his hand over hers and turned the knob.

“Thank you, so much for everything Sr. Stephanie. We will call when we get home.” Mrs. Bradshaw took the nun’s hand then pulled her into a tight embrace. She turned and hurried to catch up to her husband and the little girl who had followed him out of the building.

Sr. Stephanie walked to the door and watched as the doctor tossed the small suitcase into the trunk of the car while Mrs. Bradshaw buckled the little girl into a safety seat. She turned and waved as she closed the car door but Mary Sue looked straight ahead. Dr. Bradshaw waved over the top of the car then got in.
Sr. Stephanie watched as the car moved to the end of the block and around the corner. She brushed a tear from her eye and closed the large door.

xx

“You spend the night?” Coulson snorted as he stowed his bag under one of the seats on the large plane.

May snorted back but refused to respond. She turned away from the annoying man she was just lucky enough to have as a partner. Luck, huh!

“Almost three hours til take off,” he smiled.

May looked at the clock in the cockpit. “Not much of a math expert either, are you?”

“Ahhh, you didn’t get the message. Storm off the coast, delayed for an hour,” he informed her.

“Great,” May growled through her teeth.

“Nuff time to grab a coffee, maybe some breakfast, interested?” he suggested amicably.

“I don’t drink coffee.” She snarled as she passed him and stormed out of the plane.

“You do eat, don’t you?” He called after her then shrugged his shoulders. Yeah, he was wearing her down.

May marched through the hanger, putting enough distance between herself and that moron. She’d have to spend enough time with him when they landed. She had no intention of spending any more than she had to before that. Piper had located three veterinarians in the Philly area, none were Asian. She expanded the search and found a Dr. Bradshaw in a small town about an hour north of the city. He was squeaky clean. Not even a parking ticket. Everything about him and his wife checked out. Sr. Stephanie had done her homework.
Mary Sue would have great parents. She’d have a whole farm to grow up on, fresh air and plenty of room to run and explore…plenty of blue sky to watch clouds make crazy shapes. She’d have a mother and a father that wanted her and would give her everything she didn’t have now…shoes that fit and clean underwear. Damn, there was no way to know if they’d smack the kid around…but they didn’t seem the type. At least nothing pointed to that, but who knew.

May shook her head. What the hell? Why did it matter? It wasn’t her problem. It never was. She kept her promise and that’s all. The kid would be fine and Morse would keep an eye on the place posing as a welfare inspector on all of her surprise visits. If just one kid had one bruise…well, hell hath no fury like a May scorned. Anyway, she could just as easily put someone on the kid…check on her…make sure she was happy and healthy and…well, and no one was smacking her around. Again she shook her head. Let it go, she told herself as she slammed the door of the commissary against the wall. Three agents hurried to clear a path. She pulled a water bottle from the cooler and passed through the room and out the opposite door that led to the stairs and the gym below. A session of Tai Chi would help to settle her mind and clear it of these crazy thoughts.

xx

At this hour traffic in the city was light. Mary Sue watched as the car passed through the parts of town she recognized. The lady in the front seat was talking to her, asking her all kinds of questions like what colors she liked and did she like animals and what grade she was in and what did she like about school. Mary Sue mostly said yes or no but she wasn’t really listening. The man told the woman she was asking too many questions then asked Mary Sue if she liked music. The little girl just shrugged and looked out the window at the shops and buildings that looked so strange all closed and dark. She smiled at a small restaurant on the corner. It looked a lot like Carl’s and it was full of people sitting at those little couch tables. She turned and watched until she couldn’t see it any longer. She turned back and let out a soft sigh.

Mary Sue didn’t want to go to Philadelphia or wherever these people lived. They were nice but she didn’t want to live on a farm or help take care of animals. She wanted to drink tea with lots of honey and eat the special breakfasts that Millie would get. She wanted to go back to that big park and see what was on that yellow brick road and she wanted to watch that Oz movie. She wanted to hug that panda again and lay on the big rock and look at the clouds…but mostly…mostly she wanted May. She needed to tell her something and she couldn’t do that if she was in Philadelphia.

She had to get away.

xx

Sr. Stephanie walked through the upstairs hall checking all the dormitories after the children had
gone to school. Each bed was made, clothes hung neatly, towels folded and every faucet turned off completely. She smiled at the children’s willingness to complete their chores. The last room she checked took away that smile. The small bed under the window was now stripped to the mattress. Atop it was a small pile of clothing folded neatly and topped with red high top sneakers emblazoned with sparkling stars. The nun recognized the clothes. Mary Sue had been wearing them when she returned yesterday.

She shook her head and reached to take them from the bed. A small note slid from under one shoe. It read, ‘pleez tell May I sed godbie’.

xx

The car slowed to an almost crawl as the Bradshaws approached a congested bridge. “Uh oh,” the man said. “Looks like we’re going to be stuck for a bit,” he shook his head.

“Do you think there’s been an accident?” The lady leaned forward trying to see past all of the cars stopped in front of them. The man just shrugged his shoulders.

They moved a little then stopped completely. Mary Sue looked up at the big bridge. If she went over it she could never come back.

“I gotta go the bathroom!” The little girl announced loudly. She put one hand between her legs and squirmed in her seat.

The lady looked at the man and he shrugged again. She turned and smiled at Mary Sue. “Oh, honey, can you wait just a little bit?”

Mary Sue shook her head. “Uh uh, I gotta go now er I’ll have a accident. Puleez.” She bounced up and down.

“I think I saw a little coffee shop.” The man poked his thumb toward the back of the car. “I’m sure they must have a restroom.”

“But if you pull over we’ll never get back into this mess.” The lady shook her head.

The man laughed. “I think I’ll be right here when you get back. If anything I’ll move a couple
The lady just looked at him for a second. “Go,” he smiled. “It’ll be fine and we don’t want to have her all embarrassed.” He whispered the last part.

She shook her head and unclipped her seatbelt then opened the door. A few minutes later, Mary Sue was holding the lady’s hand as they weaved through the traffic heading for the sidewalk and a small coffee shop about fifty feet away. Horns were blowing and people were yelling about something. Mary Sue didn’t care. She let the lady lead her all the way to the door of the coffee shop. When she reached to pull it open, the little girl slipped her hand free and ran.

She didn’t know where she was going but she ran and did not look back at the lady that was calling her name and yelling for her husband and telling everyone to stop that little girl. But everyone was looking at whatever was happening at the bridge and the horns were really loud and there were sirens now. Mary Sue stopped at the corner then turned and ran down the side street.

Dr. Bradshaw had watched his wife in the mirror and saw her screaming before he jumped out of the car and heard her. He abandoned his car and rushed to her, trying to make sense of her panicked explanation. He took off in the direction she pointed after telling her to find the nearest policeman. It wouldn’t be hard as several squad cars were moving into the congested area, forcing people back into their cars. They’d find his abandoned very quickly. Mrs. Bradshaw hurried to get there before the police.

Mary Sue stopped at the second corner and breathed heavily. She looked back to see the Bradshaw man coming toward her. He was yelling something but he didn’t look mad. She looked at him and the street she needed to cross. There were so many cars trying to get past. Mary Sue took a deep breath and ran to the curb. She stopped for a second then dashed into the street with horns blaring and people cursing from all directions. She kept running toward the subway she could see on the next corner. Stopping for just a second she looked back and saw the man still coming. There was no time to catch her breath. She ran again and slid around the railing then down the stairs into the subway. She ducked under the turnstile and almost fell down the second flight of stairs then into the train that had just expelled its rush hour passengers. The doors swished closed and she fell into a seat. If the man had followed her into the train station she did not see him, but he was not on the train. It was just her and two ladies with very big purses.

The little girl sat back and listened to her heart beating against her chest. She struggled to control her breathing as she slouched down in the seat and hoped when this train stopped she could find her way to…where?
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Mary Sue is on the run with the police looking for her
May has a heart to heart with a soon to be friend and admits to herself she needs to do
something or does she
Maybe the Bradshaws are just what this kid needs.

-13-

The train rumbled through the underground tunnels, rocking and thumping for what seemed like a
very long time. Mary Sue hadn’t really noticed what direction it was traveling or where it was going.
There was no time. She hoped it wasn’t one of those trains that went all the way to another city…or
country. The little girl couldn’t really tell. All she could see outside the dirty windows were the lights
that flashed by so quickly they were just flashes. She pushed herself up straight in the seat and smiled
at the older lady that sat across from her.

“You’re pretty little to be traveling all by yourself so early in the morning.” The woman smiled.

Mary Sue blinked a few times and drew a breath. “I just look little. I ain’t a baby.” She explained.

“I see.” The woman nodded. She eyed the child’s clothing, mistaking her for one of the homeless.

“Are your parents traveling with you?”

Shaking her head quickly, Mary Sue answered. “I ain’t travelin’, just goin’ one stop.”

“Right into the city, is it?” The woman’s eyes grew very big. “Have you got business there?”

“I gotta meet somebody.” The little girl nodded then thought for a moment. “Is the next stop close to
Carl’s? It’s a place with couch tables where you can listen to music while you eat.”

The woman shook her head. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of Carl’s, but perhaps the conductor can
help.”

Mary Sue shook her head again. Conductors were ‘in charge’ people and the last time he was going
to call the police. The police would take her back to the Bradshaws. “No, I can find it. I gotta see
somebody there.”

“And so early in the morning,” the lady sighed. “This person must be very important.”

“I need her to be...” Mary Sue stopped herself from completing the thought, from daring to even
think it. “To be there before she has to go to work.” She looked up at the flashing lights that were
slowing as the train decreased speed. That meant it would stop soon. If she could find one of those
walls with all the pictures she might be able to figure out where to go.

The lady looked too, as the train’s breaks began to make that screechy sound that meant it was close
to the station. She opened her purse and swished some things around then pulled and held out a five
dollar bill to the little girl. “Take this, honey. You and your friend might need it.”
Mary Sue blinked at it for a moment. She knew she wasn’t supposed to take anything from anyone. Shaking her head she stood and inched toward the door that would open very soon. “No… no thank you, ma’am. I ain’t supposed ta take nuthin’.”

“It’s okay dear. It can be our secret.” The lady smiled again.

“Secrets ain’t good sometimes.” Mary Sue breathed as she looked up and prayed the door would open now.

“You’re right,” the lady nodded. She reached out and stuffed the money into the little girl’s hand as the door opened.

Mary Sue slipped out and into the crowd of people waiting to board. She bumped and swerved through the mass until she was free and turned just in time to see the doors swish closed and the train disappear into the tunnel. She stood for a moment watching and listening until she could no longer hear its screeching wheels on the iron track.

There were more people now, standing around looking at their watches or reading newspapers. She backed against the wall to stay out of their way. Two police officers hurried down the stairs and walked through the crowd, stopping to talk to a few of them who shook their heads or shrugged their shoulders. Slowly the little girl slid along the wall until she reached the same stairs and hurried up them in front of a man carrying a large suitcase.

xx

Mrs. Bradshaw reached her car a few seconds before a young police officer approached and asked her to please wait inside. There had been a fender bender on the bridge and traffic would begin moving as soon as things were cleared out. He smiled and told her it would not be long.

The woman took a deep breath and explained to him that she had lost her child and her husband was in pursuit. She tried to explain further but it was so complicated and she was so panicked that the man stopped her and called into the radio clipped on his shoulder requesting assistance. By the time two more officers arrived she had moved the car to the curb and accepted the cup of coffee the first officer insisted she drink. Slowly she pieced together the story of picking up Mary Sue and then losing her in the chaos caused by the accident on the bridge. No, nothing had happened and the little girl gave no indication that she was unhappy or would run away.

Dr. Bradshaw returned while his wife was speaking to the officers. He was visibly out of breath and without the little girl he had chased for several blocks. He shook his head. “I lost her in the crowd about four blocks in that direction.” He turned and pointed. One of the officers spoke into his radio, already having given the child’s description to the dispatcher. The doctor turned to his wife. “What happened?”

Mrs. Bradshaw shook her head. “Nothing,” she breathed. “She just pulled away from me and was gone. She didn’t say a word. I was speaking to her about getting donuts for the trip and she just disappeared.”

“She’s just a little kid,” one of the officers comforted. “She can’t get far. We’ll have her in no time.”

“Aland idea where she might head?” The older officer asked. “Any family or friends in the area?”

The Bradshaws looked at each other helplessly. They did not know enough about the child to answer. “She could be heading back to St. Agnes’” Dr. Bradshaw sighed. “We picked her up there a little while ago.”
“The church?” The first officer inquired.

Mrs. Bradshaw shook her head, “the orphanage.” She looked up at her husband. “I guess we don’t make very good parents, losing a child less than two hours after we had her.”

The older officer smiled. “Well, most kids don’t go running off two hours after you get ‘em.” He gave a quick nod. “You said four blocks east of here?” He wrinkled his brow as he looked at the doctor who nodded in return. “Hey, Burns, there’s a subway entrance a block further isn’t there?”

His partner nodded. “Yeah, red line heads back toward Capital Hill. I’ll have them check all the stops tween here and there.” She spoke into her own radio, alerting dispatch to have officers at each stop. “If she got on that train, we’ll have her within the hour.

xx

Coulson walked down the corridor of the base carrying his go bag. He’d asked almost every agent if they’d seen May. No one had so he made his way toward her office grumbling about how one of the younger agents should be on this mission. He’d relay the message to Piper and get back to his own business of contacting that arrogant fool Stark about some damn robot thing he claimed to have designed. Fury was interested. Stark was not good at sharing. He stopped at the spiral staircase that led to the gym and shook his head before rolling his eyes and heading down.

May stood in the center of the otherwise empty work out room. She seemed frozen in place, eyes closed, barely breathing. Coulson cleared his throat.

“I know you’re there.” She exhaled without opening her eyes.

‘Like a damn cat,’ Coulson thought to himself, but said, “mission’s been scrubbed, storm’s worse. They’re sending in someone from the Asian office.”

If she nodded it was not visible. Coulson waited for a response of some kind but when nothing changed he turned and headed for the stairs.

“Ever lose something because of your own stupidity, Coulson?” Her voice held a tone he’d never heard before. She sounded almost human.

The man turned to find the woman now seated on the floor with her back against the wall and her knees drawn up in front of her. He hadn’t even heard her move. She took a long drink from a water bottle and looked at him, clearly expecting an answer.

“I…” he hesitated thinking it might be a trick question. “I…well yeah, I guess…probably. Haven’t we all?”

May shook her head. “I rarely practice stupidity.” She huffed.

Coulson laughed a small laugh that quickly turned into a pseudo-cough. “I don’t really think it’s something that requires practice…probably why it’s called stupidity.”

“Probably,” she replied to her water bottle.

Setting down his bag, Coulson slowly approached the woman. “Sounds like you need to talk.”

May laughed through her nose. “I’m not much of a talker.”

“Well, maybe I can just sit here while you think.” He slid down to sit on the mat a few feet from her
side. “If you get the urge, I’m a good listener.” He waited for a reaction that didn’t come then added, “and I’m very good at keeping secrets…an expert I’m told.”

“You’re such a nerd, Coulson.” She offered a weak smile which he returned.

He was a nerd and he pushed every one of her buttons, but he was easy going and for some reason she felt comfortable with him. They just sat for a while listening to the old building settle and the far away sounds of the people who worked there. She told him about the kid that crashed into her in the street and how that kid was on some cockamamie mission to locate parents she’d never even seen. He nodded and shook his head in all the right places.

She told him about taking her back to the dark building that no kid should have to grow up in and how she made that damn promise she had to keep. He did not admonish or ridicule her for it, just gave a sweet smile like he would have done the same thing. He watched his fists clench when she told him about the abusive nuns and the marks on the little girl’s body. He gasped at the fact the child had climbed the fire escape in the pouring rain and chuckled softly at their adventure in the park.

Before she knew it, May had told Coulson the whole story and now waited for the lecture on how she never should have gotten involved in the first place. It did not come. At some point he had moved closer and reached out to tap the back of her hand.

“Sounds like you’ve got a soft spot for this kid and that’s nothing to be ashamed of, May.” He grinned. “I don’t think I would have done anything differently.”

“Yeah, but you have stupidity down to a science,” she deadpanned.

Coulson turned up one side of his mouth and shook his head. “So what are you going to do about it?”

May slapped her hands on her knees and stood in one fluid motion. “Nothing, it’s out of my hands. The kid’s on her way to someplace outside of Philadelphia. I’ll never see her again.” The last statement held a bit of pain, she tried to hide.

“I don’t think you’re going to forget her anytime soon.” He struggled to stand in the same fashion she had, but resorted to sliding back up the wall. “I think she’s stolen a piece of the heart most people around here don’t think you’ve got.”

Pursing her lips, May glared at him. “They better not believe anything else.”

He smiled and twisted his fingers against his lips. “Sealed tight,” he smiled.

They both turned as Piper stopped half way down the spiral staircase and leaned over the railing. “May, there’s some Stephanie on the phone for you, say’s it’s an emergency.”

xx

Sr. Stephanie saw the flashing red lights through the stained glass of the front door before she opened it. Her heart sunk at the sight of the two officers standing there. No one smiled as she stepped aside to wordlessly allow them entrance.

The men removed their caps as they stepped over the threshold and watched as small faces appeared in doorways and behind the railings of the large staircase. Several nuns hushed the children’s whispers as they ushered them back into their respective rooms, but looked to the officers with the same curiosity etched on their faces.
“Sr. Stephanie?” The taller officer inquired. At the tall nun’s nod he continued. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

Police officers arriving at St. Agnes never meant good news, but they had no child with them which meant there was no emergency placement. Perhaps that was good. The experienced nun knew better. She held out a hand toward her office and waited for the men to move. She calculated every child in her mind. Yes, all present…no, no one had complained. The diocese had not made a call and the situation with Regina and Jeremy had been addressed. She thought of the dark blue car that drove away with Mary Sue a short time ago and her heart beat rapidly wondering if there had been an accident. What if… She would not let herself even think that thought.

The taller officer spoke again, pulling a small notepad from his shirt pocket. “There’s been an incident, Sister.” He began.

Incident…Sr. Stephanie forced herself to remain calm. Incident, not accident…what kind of incident? An abandoned child…or infant? An abused child in some hospital that needed immediate care or perhaps just a temporary placement until a relative could be located. She prayed silently for the best.

“Dr. Benjamin Bradshaw gave us your name, said he picked up a…” the officer checked his notes, “Mary Sue Poots here around 7:30 this morning.” He read from the pad.

“Yes,” she answered much too quickly. “Has something happened? Is Mary Sue alright?” The nun could not keep the fear from her voice. Had she made a mistake placing the child with this couple?

The younger officer shook his head. “We aren’t sure ma’am. Seems the girl took off near the Potomac. Folks had to stop for traffic congestion, minor accident on the bridge,” he explained. “And she disappeared into the crowd.”

“Accident? What kind of accident? Was she hurt?” Sr. Stephanie felt the panic rise again.

“No, ma’am, the child wasn’t hurt,” the young officer stopped and thought for a moment. “At least we don’t think she was, but somehow she got away from her mother and took off.”

The older office cleared his throat. “There’s a bit more to it than that ma’am, but the couple thinks the girl might be heading back here. We wanted to let you know and have you let us know if she does. We’ve got several squads out looking for her, but she’s just a kid. She can’t have gone far.”

Sr. Stephanie raised her brows and shook her head. “Oh, you do not know our Mary Sue. She is quite resourceful.”

“Got a couple people think they saw her in the subway, near the red line. That goes right to the Capital. Don’t suppose she has any family there.” The man shook his head.

“Mary Sue has no family, officer. This is really the only home she knows and she was not happy with being placed with a prospective adopting couple. Perhaps you’re right and she is trying to get here, but she is far away and doesn’t read well. She will have a difficult time.” The nun worried.

“Like I said, Sister, we’ve got officers looking for her. I’m sure it won’t take long.” He smiled and nodded. “There any place other than here she might want to get to, anyplace you can think of?”

The nun started to shake her head then thought for a moment. She almost smiled. “Just one,” Sr. Stephanie nodded.

xx
Mary Sue stepped into the sunshine of early morning rush hour. People were walking in all directions and the area was full of buildings with big steps in front of them. Cars were moving slowly along very congested streets and the little girl was absolutely sure she had never seen this place before. She walked slowly to the corner and looked in all directions, checking to see if the Bradshaw man or lady had followed her somehow. There were a lot of people, but no Bradshaws. She looked down at the crushed five dollar bill still in her hand, stared at it for a second then pushed it into her pocket. The too large jeans slipped over her hips and she quickly yanked them back up with both hands.

Everybody seemed to be in a hurry and she got bumped a few times, even so much as to get ushered across the street with a large crowd of people. She rolled away from them and headed in a direction that looked a little less crowded. The little girl had no idea where she was or which way to go so any way was fine. She would just keep walking. Hiram told her once that you could never really be lost because if you kept going you would find someplace or someone that could point you in the right direction. That kinda made sense cuz the whole earth was round and if you kept walking you would get to the ocean and somebody would find you there.

Mary Sue hoped she didn’t have to walk to the ocean. She stopped after a few blocks and rested on a bench that was probably a bus stop. She looked up and smiled at the tall pointy building in the distance. She recognized it from the morning she had breakfast at the food truck. It brought a smile to her face. If she could get to it, she could find the subway that went to the shoe store and then…well, then she could find May’s house and tell her she didn’t want to live with the Bradshaws, that she didn’t want to go to Philadelphia and that…

A man sat down next to her and looked at her funny. “Shouldn’t you be in school?” He raised an eyebrow.

“It’s closed today.” She lied quickly.

“Holiday?” He raised the other eyebrow. “My kids are in school.”

“No, just my school is closed today. There’s a field trip.” She lied again.

“Figures,” he sighed. “Always flocks of kids at the end of the school year, like a damn kindergarten all day long.”

“I ain’t in kindergarten.” She stated softly. They sat in silence for a bit as she swung her legs over the edge of the bench. “I needa get to that big tower.” She pointed toward the monument.

“Well you’re headed in the right direction. Just keep walking and you’ll bump right into it in about two hours or so, depending on how fast you walk.” He looked at the size of the child. “Maybe three or four hours,” he amended.

Mary Sue let out a sigh and stood. “Thank you,” she mumbled as she took a step in the direction he had pointed.

The man shook his head. “Hey, kid, wait a minute.” He paused while she turned back. “You could sit here for about ten minutes and wait for the next bus. It’ll take you right there in about twenty minutes, depending on traffic.”

Mary Sue smiled then thought. “Does it cost a lot a money?” She pulled out the crumpled bill. “I only got this much.”

The man shook his head. “You need exact change kid.” He pulled a wad of money from his pocket.
then counted out three dollars and a lot of coins. He took her five and replaced it with the money he’d counted. “The driver will tell you how much.”

Mary Sue nodded and shoved the bills and change into her pocket. She thanked the man again and plopped down on the bench. She thought about what she’d tell the man if he asked any more questions, but he didn’t. He just pulled out a newspaper, opened it and then just disappeared behind it. The little girl shrugged her shoulders and looked down the street hoping the bus would be on time.

A police car passed by slowly causing Mary Sue to fret. She watched it go by and continue down the street then let out the breath she’d been holding.

A few minutes later it was back. The car stopped and one officer exited. He walked to the bench and stood before the man with the newspaper and cleared his throat. The man bent back one corner of the paper and looked at the policeman.

“Problem officer?” He remarked without emotion.

“Where’s the kid?” The officer asked.

The man turned to his left and stared at the empty bench for a second then looked back to the officer and shrugged his shoulders. “Guess she changed her mind.” He huffed then shook his paper back into position.

“Changed her mind?” The officer sounded very interested.

“Must have decided to take her business elsewhere,” he answered from behind the newspaper.

The officer pushed the paper down, effectively crushing it into the man’s lap. “Just what kind of business are you talking about, buddy?” He narrowed his brows and leaned forward.

The man let out a disgusted huff and attempted to straighten his newspaper and looked up at the officer again realizing that this conversation was getting out of hand. He rethought his statements and knew the cop had misunderstood.

“Hold on…just a minute,” the man stood and shook his head. “The kid said something about a field trip and asked how to get to the Washington Monument.” He ran a hand through his hair. “All I did was give her change for the bus. Last I saw her she was sitting right there,” he pointed to the opposite end of the bench, “waiting for the next bus. All I wanted to do is read my paper in piece. I have no clue where she took off to.” He shook the crumpled paper he now held in his fist. “I never laid a hand on her.”

xx

The man said to keep going this way, Mary Sue told herself as she ran along the sidewalk. The crowd had gotten thicker so it was easier to get lost among all the people. She’d crossed at least five streets and came to another bus stop. This time there was a sign and the words were easy to read. She fell on to the end of the bench, breathing heavily. She barely had time to catch her breath before the hiss of the large bus stopping at the curb had the already waiting group almost knocking her to the pavement. She caught her balance and followed them into the vehicle, holding out a handful of change for the driver to count before she moved all the way to the back and slumped into the last seat.

Three police cars passed the bus as it pulled away from the curb and into traffic. Mary Sue peered over the bottom edge of the darkened back window and watched them speed in the opposite direction. She pushed herself as far back on the seat as possible and hoped no one would come
looking for her before she reached her destination. She pulled the change from her pocket and counted it slowly.

Reading was not something she did well, but math…math was a lot easier. She had two quarters, one dime and three pennies. That made sixty three cents. The little girl scratched her head for a moment. It didn’t make sense that the bus would take pennies…maybe the man that gave her the coins didn’t count right. People didn’t like pennies, she thought, because she would find them on the sidewalk when she searched for her parents. She saved almost a whole dollar before Polly took her juice can and said she’d tell that she stole it from the poor box if she said a word. That was way back at Christmas time. She stopped picking up the pennies after that since dumb old Polly kept snooping around for more. Ha! Let her find her own. Mary Sue felt a flash of hot anger wave over her as she thought of that big bully and how she was just always picking on her for something. She made a fist around her sixty three cents and scrunched up her face wondering what it would be like to just punch old Polly right in the nose. Instead she pushed the coins back into her pocket and let out a long breath, then leaned back against the seat and watched the clouds in the bright blue sky.

One looked just like a fish and it made her wonder just how mad May was going to be after this stupid stunt. She wondered what May’s momma would do and if May really would ‘pull a momma’ and what that meant. Letting out a sigh she realized it didn’t really matter because she probably would never see her friend again anyway.

The bus stopped and Mary Sue tried not to panic. She pulled back farther into the seat and listened to the hustling as more people got on and wriggled into the seats. A large dark skinned man sat next to her, then a lady that was even larger sat next to him. She squeezed over as far as she could against the side of the bus. The big man smiled down at her. He had two gold teeth. She pulled back and disappeared into the small space between him and the soft padding beneath the window.

The bus stopped three more times before the driver announced they would make the last stop in five minutes. He told them about transfers and special return tickets and to make sure he punched any all day ride tickets before they got off as he pulled into a spot where a lot of other buses were stopped. The big man next to her had fallen asleep and was snoring with a sound a lot like Fr. Simon’s cat. His meaty arm practically covered her when he folded it across his middle. The lady on the other side of him poked at him a bit but he just snorted and kept on snoring. She would have laughed if it hadn’t been for the police officer who suddenly appeared in front of that lady. Mary Sue pulled back behind the big man’s arm and slid her legs under his wild colored shirt that hung to one side. The officer asked the lady if she’d seen a little girl…a little white girl with dark hair and eyes with a stained t-shirt and too big jeans, no socks and dirty sneakers. Mary Sue closed her eyes and tried to wriggle behind the big man that was still snoring. He snorted again and she froze, not wanting to wake him.

The lady told the officer she hadn’t seen any children and then asked if there was a problem. The officer told her the little girl had gone missing and they suspected she might be near the monument or on one of the buses headed that way. He told her the driver thought he saw the little girl get on, but since the back door had opened at each stop, he wasn’t sure if she had gotten off. The lady agreed that was possible and said she hoped the officer found the little girl. He thanked her then turned around and took a step then turned back. He asked if the big man might have seen anything and the lady laughed. She said the only thing her husband saw was the inside of his eyelids. Then they both laughed. The officer said thank you again and took a few steps then exited through the back door of the bus.

Mary Sue let out a relieved sigh…very quietly. Maybe the man was so big the lady hadn’t seen her over him. Now she was shaking him really hard and he snuffled and coughed and pushed her hands away, telling her he was awake. He grabbed the back of the seat in front of them and struggled to
pull himself to his feet while his wife had already gotten up and waddled toward the exit. She spoke to him like he was there, not even noticing he wasn’t following yet. The little girl stood as soon as the big man got to his feet and stayed close to him as he moved toward the door. He stood back and waited for a few people to go before him, then turned sideways and eased out of the door with Mary Sue close behind.

Outside the bus the air was fresh and it smelled a lot better. Mary Sue took a deep breath and peeked around the man who was now listening to his wife ramble on about some place she wanted to see and how he better keep up because they only had one day to do all the sightseeing they could.

A lot of people were standing and pointing and asking directions and taking pictures. They were also talking to two police officers that were moving in and out of the crowd. Mary Sue felt her heart beat faster. They were probably asking the same questions as the cop on the bus asked the big lady. The Bradshaws must have called them and now they were looking for her.

The big couple started walking. Mary Sue kept them between her and the police officers but she was close enough to hear one of them.

“Yes, ma’am, we’re pretty sure she’s in the vicinity. A woman on the train said she got off at the Capitol stop and a guy gave her some change for the bus.” The officer informed the lady. “No idea why a little kid would be headed for the monument, but who knows with kids.” He handed her a small card and asked if she’d call if she saw the little girl. The lady nodded and then turned to the others in the group she was with shaking her head as they headed off toward their destination. The police officer moved to another person and asked more questions.

Mary Sue stayed close to the big people, walking slowly to keep their pace until they were far enough away from the bus stop for her to take a chance and head toward the big palace where the giant sat in the big chair. She knew now he was an old president and his picture was on the pennies she had in her pocket. She remembered looking at them when she rode in May’s car back to St. Agnes yesterday. The subway was just a few blocks from that palace. She just had to get there.

The big people stopped at the top of a short flight of stairs. They were arguing about which way to go and what to see first. Mary Sue ran down the stairs and weaved through the crowd along the huge pool. She heard someone yell, HEY! The little girl did not turn to see who it was, but turned toward the shrubbery that lined the outer edge of the large walkway and pushed her way through the prickly branches ignoring the scratches it took on her arms and face. She broke through the opposite side and ran. When she stopped, nothing looked familiar. Ducking between two buildings into a narrow walkway she dropped into a doorway and pulled herself into a tight ball. The child listened for any sign she’d been followed as she gasped for air to fell her aching lungs. Resting her forehead against her knees she drew deep breaths and closed her eyes.

She’d stay right here until she was sure no one could find her.

xx

May grabbed her phone from Piper’s outstretched hand and scowled at the younger woman.

“You left it on the desk,” Piper shrugged. “I thought it might be important.”

May shook her head, pushed the phone to her ear and spun away from the young agent. “Yes,” she hissed into the cell.

There was little speaking after. Piper descended the stairs and stood staring at the back of May’s head
glancing at Coulson only once before giving a curt nod and heading out of the gym. The man watched as May’s free hand curled into a tight fist and her body tensed with anger.

“I will be right there.” She growled into the phone before poking it silent and shoving it into her pocket. She drew a deep breath before turning around, giving no indication of giving up the anger she had built.

Coulson was as puzzled as he was curious. That was May’s personal cell, he knew from the size and shape of the object Piper had handed her. She made eye contact for a brief instant before heading for the spiral staircase. He started to call after her knowing full well she would not share any more personal information than she (surprisingly) had already done.

“You’re right, Coulson,” she remarked as she climbed. “It’s time to do something about it.”

With that she disappeared, leaving him to debate on whether to follow and offer his help or stay put and keep quiet. He chose the latter. She’d shared information with him, personal but sketchy. She used no names, so he had half a picture of what had been eating away at her since their last mission. He’d known May since the academy, harbored some crazy crush on her that he kept a secret from everyone and requested her as a partner whenever given the opportunity. He knew she’d brush him off, or knock him out, if he offered his help and if he went running after her right now Piper would have an earful to share with every other agent in the base. He’d wait. She’d be back. They had all the time in the world.

xx

Having nowhere else to go, the Bradshaws returned to St. Agnes and were welcomed by Sr. Stephanie who offered apologies for not sharing Mary Sue’s propensity for dashing off when threatened by any adversity. The couple understood, and surprisingly was still willing to take the child into their home. Right now they were concerned for her safety and felt just as guilty for losing the little girl. The nun invited the couple to the dining area where they might share a cup of tea but the ringing of her office phone pulled her away. She turned toward it then looked apologetically at Mrs. Bradshaw.

“Please, Sister, get it. It could be about Mary Sue.” The woman urged. Her husband nodded, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

“Kitty,” Sr. Stephanie called to the young girl about to climb the stairs. She looked to the nun. “Please take the Bradshaws to the dining room and have Sr. Constance bring a pot of tea.”

The child nodded and shifted the backpack she carried from her shoulder to rest on the floor at the base of the stairs. She offered a hand, which the distraught woman took and led the couple through the wide archway through the common room and into the dining area. Sr. Stephanie hurried away to answer the still ringing phone.

“You can sit anywhere. Dinner isn’t for another two hours. It gives us time to put away our things after school.” Kitty smiled as she pointed toward the long table. “I’ll tell Sr. Constance and she’ll bring the tea.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Bradshaw answered in a shaky voice.

Kitty smiled and patted the woman’s hand. “You don’t have to worry about Mary Sue. She always comes back.” She stopped for a moment and bit her lip. “We heard the Sisters talking about it at school.” She looked to the floor then back up. “Not eavesdropping…just everybody was saying something…”
Mr. Bradshaw smiled as he pulled out a chair for his wife. “It’s okay…Kitty?” He wasn’t sure of the girl’s name. She nodded and he smiled again. “I’m sure a lot of people are talking about it. The police are looking for Mary Sue right now.”

Kitty’s eyes went wide. “Oh, she always comes back, really. She won’t leave because she thinks her parents will come back for her.” The little girl quickly covered her mouth with one hand. Surely she’d said too much. “A lot of the kids here think that…” she tried to cover up the slip.

“Do you?” Mrs. Bradshaw asked as she sat down.

Kitty shook her head. “No ma’am. My parents can’t come back. They’ve gone to heaven.” Kitty thought for a moment. “That’s what the Sisters tell me and it sounds better than saying that they died.”

Mrs. Bradshaw drew a quick breath and looked up at her husband then back at Kitty. “I’m so sorry, dear.”

Kitty nodded. She didn’t really like talking about her parents, but sometimes it was easier than not talking about it. Mrs. Bradshaw looked pretty sad and if she started to cry…well, Kitty didn’t want that so she took a few steps backward. “I’ll go tell Sr. Constance, then I have to put my stuff away. You can wait right here.” She turned and disappeared through a large swinging door a few seconds before Sr. Stephanie appeared in the door opposite the kitchen.

“The police think she may be somewhere in the National Mall.” She announced as she hurried toward the couple. “A few people have seen her.”

“Why would she go there?” Mr. Bradshaw wrinkled his brow.

Before the nun could respond the loud gong of the door bell rang once before the large portal opened and then slammed shut. Sr. Stephanie turned to try to head off the woman she knew had arrived.

Mary Sue caught herself before she slipped off the low step. She rubbed her eyes and blinked at the dim light in the dirty alley. The little girl had not intended to fall asleep, but curled into the corner she’d found she’d cried until her eyes could not stay open and gave in to the defense of sleep. It must have been a good hiding place because no one found her. She stretched out her legs and gave a wide yawn then jumped back when several small cans dropped and rolled across the greasy ground. She peeked around the edge of the doorway and spotted a large grubby cat on to of an even grubbier dumpster. Standing she let out a relieved breath and wiped her hands on her pants. She walked slowly toward the opening that led to the street. Cars went by and she could hear people walking, mumbling and chuckling as they ambled by the alley.

She stepped out onto the sidewalk and took in the unfamiliar surroundings. There were not big crowds or statues and she had no idea where the long dark pool was because she ran so far and made so many twists and turns she’d never find her way back. Turning toward the closest corner she shoved her hands into her pockets and started walking.

Mary Sue crossed several streets before she lifted her head. Several children played in the street, calling to each other and racing up and down stairs that led into apartment buildings. People sat on those stairs chatting with each other, laughing at what was said or frowning in agreement to some comment. The small shop on the corner was busy with patrons coming and going with their bags of what would soon be supper. The little girl stopped in front of the store and thought about the money in her pocket. She hadn’t had anything since breakfast yesterday and her stomach was violently protesting.
A young boy ran from the store knocking the little girl off balance. He kept going, oblivious to the girl’s presence. Mary Sue stepped into the small establishment and walked slowly down the narrow aisle. There was cereal and bread, crackers and jams, coffee and tea bags. At the end of the aisle was a large refrigerated area with big glass doors. It held milk and soda, juice and water. Mary Sue thought about the three dollars and sixty three cents she could feel in her pocket.

“You buyin’ somethin’, kid?” A gruff voice caused her to jump.

Mary Sue spun and backed up against the glass doors. She looked up at the older man who towered over her. “I…I don’t know.”

The man snorted loudly. “Don’t know?” He laughed again. “That’s a good one.” He turned very serious and pointed a finger at her. “You better not be tryin’ steal from me kid or I’ll kick yer ass all the way to Pennsylvania Ave.”

Mary Sue flattened herself against the doors and shook her head quickly. “I can’t reach the water.” She squeaked.

“Why didn’t ya say so, kid?” The man growled as he yanked open the door and pulled a small bottle of water from the fridge then turned toward the front of the store. He was halfway up the aisle before he turned back. “Let’s go, kid.” He hooked a thumb toward the register.

Pushing herself away from the cold doors, Mary Sue followed the man. He stepped behind a tall counter and hit a few buttons. “That all?” he grumbled.

She nodded but her stomach growled otherwise. The man raised his brows and looked at her over the top of his dark rimmed spectacles. He turned and took a few steps toward a smaller glass refrigerator door and pulled out a triangular cellophane wrapped egg salad sandwich, tossed it on the counter next to her little water bottle and shook his head.

Mary Sue pulled the money from her pocket, reached up and set it on the counter. “I only got this much.” She stood on tiptoe to peer at him over the edge of the counter.

The man let out a long breath, pulled a dollar from the crumpled money and pushed the rest bag. “Now, get otta here, yer mother’s callin’ ya.” He flicked his hand at her and nodded toward the door.

The little girl wrinkled her brow. “I ain’t got no mother, but thank you sir.” She squished the money back into her hand, shoved it in her pocket and took the items the man had pushed to the edge of the counter.

“Get!” The man jerked his thumb toward the door.

The little girl gave a quick nod and obeyed. She turned left and walked around the corner, carrying her supper. There was a small park ahead and the little girl knew that meant benches and a place to just sit and think. She waited for the ‘walk’ light then crossed the street and hurried into the small grassy area.

xx

“How long is she gone?” May barked as she approached the frazzled nun.

“May,” Sr. Stephanie sighed. “I thought she might come to you.”

Shaking her head, May continued to the nun’s office. “I was at work,” she hedged. “Stopped and checked my place. She hasn’t been there.” She let out a frustrated breath. “How long?” she repeated.
“I’m sorry, May. I didn’t know who else to call. I thought for sure she would make her way to you but the police…”

“Police?!” May snapped. “You called the police?! Damn it, Sister, she’s just a kid.”

“The Bradshaws were panicked, May. They had no other choice. She just ran and they could not catch her.” Sr. Stephanie sighed as she put a hand to her forehead. “I don’t know if I would have done differently.”

“How long is she gone?” May asked again, clearly losing what was left of her patience.

Sr. Stephanie shook her head. “Since before nine this morning.”

May slammed both hands on the desk. “Seven hours? She’s been gone more than seven hours? Where are they looking?” She growled.

“She may be somewhere near the National Mall but that was hours ago and no one has seen her since a little before noon.” The nun sighed but May wasn’t listening.

She’d pulled out her phone and was barking orders to someone. She shoved the cell back into her pocket without saying goodbye.

“What the hell is she doing in the National Mall?” May demanded more to herself than to the nun who had no answer since she had asked the same question in not so many words a few hours ago.

“The Bradshaws are in the dining room. Would you like to speak with them? They might be able to give you more information.” Sr. Stephanie held out a hand toward the door.

May thought for a moment. What she wanted to do was tear into the two fools who managed to lose a kid less than an hour after making her their first priority. She couldn’t believe they had let this get to this point. What the hell kind of people did this place trust to take kids into their care? Those two imbeciles shouldn’t be allowed to adopt a goldfish let alone a kid with more issues than most adults. Her insides burned with the animosity she felt for the couple she had yet to meet.

Drawing a deep breath, May attempted to pull her emotions back into place. Mary Sue was quick and managed to get herself in to more hot water than most kids, without even trying. What the hell was wrong with that kid? She thought about Piper’s report and how the couple seemed to be perfect for this little hellion. Beside that, they were willing to take her despite all of her idiosyncrasies and that kid had a lot of them. She was sure there was some kind of law that said the nun had to tell the adoptive parents the truth. Maybe this couple…no this couple was definitely what Mary Sue needed. Who was she to question what Sr. Stephanie and Social Services had found to be the best outcome for this kid?

May let out the breath she’d been holding, slow and through puffed cheeks then gave a quick nod. She’d talk to them, get a feel for them and maybe a lead on where that damn kid took off to…and why.

Sr. Stephanie made quick introductions and invited May to join them for tea which she declined. The Bradshaws relayed what had happened that morning and how quiet and withdrawn the little girl had been. They assumed she was just shy with them as they had not had the usual pre-placement meetings and visits. Mrs. Bradshaw explained the little girl’s request to use the bathroom and how they had to leave the car to walk back to the coffee shop. Mary Sue was quiet but gave no indication she was about to just run. The woman sobbed a bit and reached for her husband’s hand when she got
to the part about losing the child in the crowd.

“I should have held her hand tighter, but I…” she broke down again, falling onto her husband’s shoulder as he wrapped an arm around her and assured her it was not her fault.

May drew a breath and grit her teeth in an effort to quiet the two sides of her brain that debated on whether to agree it was the woman’s fault and tear her a new one because of it or sympathize with her and explain that kid’s ability to do the impossible and the unexpected…

Not necessarily in that order…

xx

The bodega owner shook his head as he turned back to his work stocking his shelves. “Kids,” he muttered to himself as he pushed cans of tomato soup into place. He glanced up at a small television that displayed a news report without sound and frowned at the traffic stalled on the bridge…again. With the last of the soup cans in order he pulled a small knife from his pocket and slashed open an large box of canned corn the began lining it up on the shelf above the soups. Again he glanced at the television and saw a familiar little face. He leaned over the counter and turned on the volume. The picture flashed again along with a phone number and a request to call with any information.

The man shook his head and lifted the receiver on his ancient phone, dialing the number on the screen.

xx

Egg salad was not Mary Sue’s favorite but she was hungry and today it was good. She finished most of it then crumbled up the crusts and tossed them to the pigeons that had gathered at her feet. The water went very quickly and she wished she’d taken her back pack from the car so she could put the empty bottle there and fill it at a water fountain…if she could find one. Instead, she cleaned up all of the paper and walked across the well worn path to the trash can on the other side. After depositing it she turned in all directions hoping to find a restroom. Lots of parks had them so the homeless people would go in the bushes. She crinkled up her nose trying not to imagine being that desperate but if she didn’t find someplace soon…well, she might not have a choice.

Listening closely she detected the sound of kids, lots of kids. Lots of kids meant a playground and kids always needed to ‘go potty’. There had to be a bathroom nearby. She headed for the sound.

Ten minutes later she felt a lot better and the place had soap and water. She washed her hands and face then stepped back out into the fading sunlight. Mary Sue didn’t really like the dark. She hurried toward the street where she knew there would be more light than the park would offer. Looking down the street the little girl smiled at a familiar sight.

It would be safe there.

She hurried toward it.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Mary sue finds refuge and may realizes what she really needs

“We’ve checked cameras at the Mall and every intersection. Tech thinks they spotted a kid fitting your description near the reflection pool but there’s just a glimpse. Sending it to you now.” Piper’s voice was professional, but May could hear the unasked questions. She flipped off the sound and waited for the video. Piper was right it was blurry and the number of people made it difficult to pick out any individual but there just for a few seconds was a small blip of dark hair and tattered jeans. The little girl looked quickly over her shoulder and sprinted through the crowd, disappearing near the hedge line. May flicked back on the sound.

“Keep looking, every camera in the perimeter, spread out and keep me posted. I don’t care how small a glimpse you find, I want to know.” She flicked off the phone and stashed it in her pocket before the younger agent could answer.

The phone in Sr. Stephanie’s office rang. May turned from the far end of the foyer and turned to watch the nun hurry into the room to answer it. The clinking and murmurs from the dining room let everyone know the children had sat down to their evening meal. The Bradshaws had been invited to join them, as was May but all had refused and excused themselves to the foyer to wait for any news of the little fugitive’s location. Dr. Bradshaw rose from the bench where he sat with his wife as Sr. Stephanie exited her office.

“Someone’s seen Mary Sue,” the nun exclaimed with a weak smile. “A small market owner thinks she may have been in his store about an hour ago.”

Mrs. Bradshaw let out something between a relieved sigh and a terrified sob. Her husband dropped back on to the bench and took her in his arms.

“Did they say where?” May asked, already dialing her cell phone.

The nun nodded. “Not the exact address but they said it was about twenty blocks northeast of the Mall.”
May shook her head. That kid moved with inhuman speed. Where the hell was she headed? Did she even know? “Piper, she barked into the phone. Concentrate on the area north east of Lincoln Park.”

“What the hell, May!” Piper sniped. “This kid’s got wings or is that 0-84 in the city?”

“Just do it, Piper,” May snarled and shoved her phone back into her pocket. She was tired of sitting here, pacifying the Bradshaws and just waiting. It would dark within the hour. She was done pacing the floor. “Sister,” May smiled at the nun. “Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw, you’ll have to excuse me. I’m going to do some looking of my own. I will keep in touch.”

Before any of them could react, she was out the door.

xx

Mary Sue hurried up the concrete steps and pushed then pulled the large wooden door. It was difficult but she managed to open it just enough to squeeze through. It was dark and quiet inside. The smells were a little different but familiar enough to make her feel the comfort and warmth of the place. She pushed open the second large door and entered the sanctuary of the large building. A small light shone below a large picture she did not recognize. The long wooden benches that lined both sides of the enormous room reflected the soft light. She slid into one of them and looked up at the wide table at the front of the room. Blinking a few times she wondered where the large crucifix that should have been above it was and for the first time realized there were no statues or candles.

It didn’t matter. It smelled right, different but right. It was quiet and empty. No one would look for her here. She pulled the money from her pocket and held it for a few minutes before standing and looking in all directions before spotting what she needed. She hurried to the small box on the wall and traced the letters on it with her index finger. Satisfied it was the poor box, she pushed the money she had left into it then turned and faced the altar.

“I know it isn’t the same, God, but it’s all I got now. When I get more I’ll pay ya back. I’m real sorry I took the money. I’m real sorry I sinned.” She bowed her head and tried to say one of the prayers she had to learn for First Communion last year. She told Sr. Stephanie she wasn’t gonna pray anymore but this was different. She wasn’t praying for nothing, just being sorry. “I’m just gonna stay here til tomorrow, God. Then I can look for the way back again. I ain’t hidin’…well, not really.” She bowed her head and looked up over her eyebrows. “I ain’t sposed ta lie, speshly to you cuz you know anyways.” The little girl shrugged her shoulders and headed back to the pew and sat down.
“I think He’ll understand.” A soft voice came from the darkness, causing the child to jump up and look in all directions.

A man in a dark suit with a collar that kinda looked like Fr. Simon’s stepped into the soft light. “It’s okay. You’re safe here.” He held up a dark hand that was very pink on the palm side. Taking a few steps toward her he smiled with very white teeth and sat in a pew on the opposite side of the church about ten rows away. “Please sit…be comfortable.”

Mary Sue stared at the man, but lowered herself back to the seat. “Thank you,” she barely whispered. The man smiled back and gave a little nod. For a few minutes they sat in silence. Mary Sue sat back and swung her feet in the space between the pews. She looked down and wondered at the absence of the kneeler.

“Is this your church?” The little girl asked the back of the man’s head.

“This is the Lord’s house,” he smiled. She knew that even though she couldn’t see his face. She could hear his smile. “Everyone is welcome here,” he added, “especially those who are lost.”

Mary Sue nodded. “I ain’t lost.” She stated calmly. “I know where I am, just don’t know how to get where I was before.” She shrugged. “Maybe they don’t want me no more anyway.” She wrapped her fingers around the edge of the seat and watched her feet swing back and forth. “I don’t wanna go ta Philadelphia.”

“Hmmm, sounds like you have a bit of a problem,” the man nodded. “My name is Reverend Dewey.” He smiled. “Do you think I might sit a bit closer to you? It would be easier not to shout across the sanctuary.”

The little girl shrugged her shoulders then nodded. The man moved down the aisle and sat just three pews away.

“Is this okay?”

Mary Sue peeked up then nodded.
“Did you come here from Philadelphia?” The man asked.

The little girl shook her head. “I ain’t never went there and I don’t wanna live there with the Bradshaws.”

“I see,” the man nodded and folded his fingers together on the back of the pew. “Are they bad people? Have they hurt you?”

“Uh huh,” Mary Sue shook her head again and still watched her feet. “They wanna dopt me but I needa find my own mom. She’s gonna be like me cuz Sister said God gives ya what ya need not what ya want and I needa mom like me.”

The man lowered his head. “That is understandable,” he nodded. “But perhaps you could give these people a chance. They might be what you need after all.”

“They ain’t.” She answered quickly. “The misses lady Bradshaw don’t got eyes like mine.” She blinked at the man several times.

“And this is important?” He asked.

Mary Sue nodded. “I know what her eyes look like and it ain’t her.”

“Did you run away?” The man sounded serious now.

“It ain’t the same if you run to somethin’. Is it?” The little girl asked her feet.

“I think the people who care about you worry the same. Don’t you?” He answered.

“Nobody cares about me.” Mary Sue shrugged.

“The Bradshaws might,” he suggested. “They did want to adopt you.”
The little girl let out a heavy sigh. “They didn’t know me yet. I always get sent back, cuz I don’t fit.” She sighed again. “Even when I got borned I didn’t fit cuz they didn’t want me. I got left at the church.”

“Sometimes people can’t care for babies, so they make sure someone else does.” He assured her.

Mary Sue shook her head. “Sister said they thought I was dead so they just left me.” She quickly brushed away the tear that rolled over her cheek. “I tried to find them for a long time but they don’t want me anyways so it don’t matter no more.” She pushed away all of the tears with the backs of her hands.

The man was next to her before she realized it. He handed her a handkerchief and put an arm around her then wrapped her in a big hug. “That’s a lot for a little one like you to be carrying around. But, I think you know someone cares about you.”

“God?” the little girl asked from inside the hug.

The man smiled and nodded. “Well, yes the good Lord cares about us all, but someone has been looking for you all day, Mary Sue. I’m sure that means they care.”

The little girl pulled back and looked at the man with wide eyes. “You’ve been on television all day. Everyone is looking for you. Don’t you think it’s time to let them know you are safe? Don’t you think you should let them stop worrying?”

“I don’t wanna go to Philadelphia.” The little girl shook her head. “They won’t listen to me. It ain’t what I need. It ain’t even what I want. Don’t God know that?” She sniffled before he pressed the hanky to her nose. “I just want…” She stopped herself.

“What is it you want, little one?” The man asked softly, pulling her closer.

“I need…” she sniffled.

The man looked down at the child then up at the front of his church. “Lord, please help this little one to find her way back. Let her see want she needs and have the courage to let those who love her know what it is her heart truly desires.”
For a few minutes he comforted the heartbroken child, then helped her to dry her tears. Squeezing her a little tighter, he smiled. “I think it’s time you went home, little one. How about I take you there?”

xx

Piper had no further information to share after checking the few traffic cameras in the area May had directed her. As ordered she continued to monitor them along with any information the police shared with each other or their dispatch.

May drove her SUV up and down the streets in the area, stopping to investigate alleys and parks before realizing that one small child could easily be swallowed up by the city and refusing to believe some of the nightmares that played out in her mind. When her phone buzzed in her pocket she pulled it out and growled into it before checking the screen.

“I hope you’ve got something!” She snarled.

“May?” Sr. Stephanie’s voice was meek and gentle.

“Sister, I…I’m sorry I…” May stammered. “What? Is there news?” She looked at the clock on her dashboard. It was almost nine thirty, more than twelve hours since the kid disappeared.

“They’ve found her, May. She’s on her way to us. She’s safe.” Sr. Stephanie’s voice was a mixture of relief and exhaustion.

May stopped the car in the middle of the block and let out a long breath. The kid was safe and on her way back to St. Agnes. The Bradshaws were still there, waiting to take her to her new home. She placed her hands on the steering wheel and rested her forehead against it. This whole nightmare day was over.

“May? May, are you there?” Sr. Stephanie’s voice came from the phone on the seat.

Looking at it, May considered just hanging up and ignoring the nun. She couldn’t say goodbye again. With one quick move she flicked off the phone and shoved it into the glove compartment
before the idiot behind her could blow his horn again. She gave him a quick salute out of her window and moved down the block to the stop sign then turned toward home.

xx

May drove through the dark streets trying desperately to empty her mind, to clear her thoughts. But that little face smiled through her defenses. That voice asked question after question. She saw that pain in those little eyes and the elation at her presence. She felt the warmth of those little arms around her. But the thing that made her heart ache was that damn panda laying on that bed in that room that no one would ever use. She stopped at the light and tapped her fingers on the wheel.

“What are you going to do about it?” Coulson’s question repeated over and over in her head. “Sounds like she’s got a piece of your heart…” Mixed with it like some kind of jumbled conversation with herself.

May slammed her hand on the steering wheel. “It’s about time I got it back!” She growled as the car squealed around the corner heading toward St. Agnes.

xx

Reverend Dewey rang the bell as he stood and smiled down at the little girl holding his hand. He winked as they waited for the door to open. When it did, Sr. Stephanie gathered Mary Sue into her arms and held her tightly. She pushed her away for a moment then pulled her back.

“Mary Sue, we were so worried. Sweet heart, why would you do such a thing? Are you alright?” She looked up at the man who stood on the porch. “Thank you so much for bringing her home, Reverend. Please come in, please come meet the Bradshaws. I am sure they want to thank you as well. This has been such a dreadful day.” She stood and stepped aside for the man to enter, but held tightly to the little girl’s hand.

The man moved into the foyer and looked down at the child then at the nun. “I would like to meet the Bradshaws.” He smiled down at Mary Sue who shook her head sadly but followed Sr. Stephanie as she led the man across the foyer toward the common room.

Before they entered Mrs. Bradshaw had raced across the floor and went to her knees in front of the little girl, pulling her into a tight hug that Mary Sue did not return.
“Oh, Mary Sue I am so sorry. I should have held your hand better. I am so sorry this happened. Please forgive me.” The woman was sobbing.

Mary Sue frowned and looked up at the tall nun still holding her hand.

“Do you have something to say, Mary Sue?” Sr. Stephanie urged as she raised her eyes toward the Bradshaws.

“I’m sorry,” the little girl mumbled. “But I don’t wanna go to Philadelphia with you.”

“Mary Sue,” Sr. Stephanie warned. “We’ve talked about this.”

“I can’t.” Mary Sue explained to the nun. “Cuz God is gonna give me what I need, you said he would. I just gotta wait here for him to do it.”

The loud door bell rang for a second time that evening. Sr. Stephanie dropped the child’s hand to answer it, but the door opened before she could reach it.

“May,” she exhaled.

“We need to talk.” May announced.

“Take a number,” the nun sighed, exasperated.

“May!” Mary Sue squealed as she tried to race toward her, but was stopped by Dr. Bradshaw’s hold on her arm. She turned and looked up at him, but did not resist.

“Sr. Stephanie,” the doctor started as he helped his wife to stand and slid Mary Sue’s hand into his own. “It is very late. I think I’d like to get on the road, again. We would really like to have our daughter in her own bed tonight or at least before tomorrow morning.” He smiled.

“Yes, yes of course,” Sr. Stephanie turned from May to face the couple. “I understand, it has been a long day and it is very late. I can offer a room to you if you’d like. You can get an early start in the
“No,” the man shook his head. “I think Patricia will take Mary Sue to the lavatory and we will be on the road as soon as possible.”

May felt something shatter inside and swallowed hard at the unfamiliar feeling. She’d waited too long, missed her chance.

Mrs. Bradshaw took the little girl’s hand and started for the girl’s lav at the end of the hallway.

Mary Sue dragged her feet but followed then looked up at the Reverend who winked his eye and looked toward May.

“NO!” Mary Sue stopped and pulled her hand free. “I don’t wanna go with you. I need to be here.” She ran to May before the woman or her husband could catch her. Wrapping her arms around May she squeaked in a voice none had heard before.

“Please don’t let them take me, please May. I don’t want to go with them. I need to be with you. I need you. I want to…want to stay with you. Please May, please I want to look at the clouds with you, please,” the little girl was in tears, clawing at May who had dropped down to her level. “Please… I want to be your sky with all the clouds when you remember them…I’ll go to the park with the yellow bricks and I won’t be scared and I’ll be quiet and won’t touch nothin’, please May don’t let them take me. I know I was bad and did a real stupid stunt and you can pull momma on me. I won’t never ever do stupid stunts no more forever. Please, May. I need you, just you.” Out of breath, the child threw herself around the woman hanging on tight enough to make the woman’s breathing difficult.

May stood with the little girl’s arms and legs wrapped around her. She paused for just a moment before wrapping her arms around the little body and whispering in her ear. “You and me, kid, you and me.”

“Mary Sue,” Sr. Stephanie spoke softly and laid a hand on the little girl’s back. “You know May can’t do that. Come now,” she tried to take the child but could not budge the bond between her and May.

May was no help. She turned to the side and glared at the nun.
Reverend Dewey stepped forward. “The Lord works in His own way, I understand and it seems as though this child knows what she wants as well as what she needs. Apparently, so does this woman.” He smiled at May.

Dr. Bradshaw let out a sigh. “It makes more sense now. We certainly cannot ask this little one to love us, when she clearly loves someone much more.”

His wife smiled as she wiped the tears from her eyes. She nodded as she walked across the wide foyer and placed a hand on Mary Sue’s back. She rubbed it in small circles. “I am so sorry, sweetie. I didn’t know.” She looked into May’s eyes. “It seems this little girl already has a mom.” She leaned forward and kissed the back of Mary Sue’s head, causing the child to grip May even tighter.

Sr. Stephanie looked from one person to the other. “This…this is…I don’t…”

The Reverend stepped closer to the nun. “I think you know what to do, Sister.” He smiled.

“Sister,” Dr. Bradshaw started as he put an arm around his wife. “I think we will take you up on that offer and start back in the morning. It has been a long day and everyone is pretty tired.”

The nun nodded.

“The doctor is right,” the Reverend chuckled. “I’ve got a bit of a drive myself.” He moved toward the door stopping as he passed May and the little girl. “Good night, Mary Sue. I’m glad you have what you need and you are right, your mom does have eyes just like yours.” He bid everyone good night and exited.

“May,” Sr. Stephanie sighed. “There is so much paperwork we need to do. It will take hours.”

“Tomorrow,” May replied. “We will do it tomorrow. Right now, I am taking this one home and getting her into bed.”

Mary Sue picked up her head for the first time as she relaxed her grip. “Are you going to punish me?” She looked into May’s dark eyes, seeing what she had been looking for, for so very long.

May stared back. “Oh, yes…you and I are going to have a very long discussion and possibly very
uncomfortable conversation.”

Mary Sue smiled broadly and hugged May again. “I love you, May.” She whispered softly.

“Love you too, my Skye,” May breathed.

- Epilogue -

Three weeks later May arrived to sign papers that would finalize her petition to adopt Mary Sue Poots. The little girl skipped up the stairs and pulled the door open before May had a chance to ring the bell. The little girl was banished to the courtyard as the adults met to take care of paperwork.

She stepped into the warm sunlight and waved to Kitty who stood across the yard. They ran to greet each other.

“Hey, Mary Sue!” Kitty smiled.

The little girl shook her head. “I ai…I’m not Mary Sue no more, Kitty. Now, I’m Skye. I’m May’s Skye.” She smiled. “Ain’t that pretty…I mean…”

Kitty giggled and held up a hand. “I get it and yes it is very pretty. I really like it, Skye.” They both giggled then ran to the two empty swings.

“I got something new too.” Kitty grinned as they passed in swinging flight.

“What?” Skye grinned as they passed again.

“Me and Jack are going to a forever home with the Bradshaws.” Kitty dragged her feet in the dust and stopped her swing a second before Skye did the same.

“Really? In Philadelphia?”
“Yep, we’re going next Friday. We visited last weekend. It was great. They’ve got bunnies and goats and two horses and a big house and…” Kitty stopped. “I’m sorry….” She whispered, thinking she was making the other girl feel badly.

“That’s great,” Skye smiled.

“Skye!” May’s voice came from across the yard.

The little girl stood and gave a quick wave. “I’m glad you like the Bradshaws, Kitty. I’m glad they like you and Jack.” She hugged her friend tightly then raced across the yard and smiled up at May.

“Done?” Skye asked as she took May’s hand.

“Let’s go home, kid.” May smiled.

“Can we have lunch at Carl’s?” Skye asked as they headed for the front door. “I wanna show Millie my new shoes and she said they got the best Mac and cheese ever.”

May rolled her eyes, but nodded earning a quick hug. She returned it without thinking.

Coulson hadn’t been completely right. This kid hadn’t taken a piece of her heart, she’d stolen it completely.

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