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The Fairee Tale

by fyrefairee

Summary

Sent to spend the summer with her grumpy old great grandfather Edward, Lise discovers a box in the attic filled with notebooks. Slowly, her family history emerges. Lise finds five notebooks - one Red, one Navy, one Olive, one Tan and another Olive. Each of the notebooks turn out to be written by one of Lise's forebears, and Lise devours the story left by family members she never met.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

Y'all know the characters that aren't mine. I'm just playing with them for a while....

Lise stomped up the stairs, hoping that she would be disturbing her great-grandfather, but knowing that she probably wouldn't. She resented him, resented being here with him in the middle of nowhere, hours from any towns, miles from the nearest neighbour. Resented his silence, his grumpiness, his coldness. She resented her parents for sending her here, for the entire summer.

Her great-grandfather heard Lise stomping up the stairs, but left her to it. He was too wrapped up in his own little bubble of grief, too intent on the cocoon it formed around him to respond, to talk to the girl left in his care for the summer. The girl who reminded him too much of his youth, enhancing his grief and the intense pain of knowing what he had lost.

It was the summer before Lise’s senior year, and she thought she was meant to be back at home, relaxing in the sun by her best friend Olive’s pool, talking about boys, and generally doing nothing much all summer break.

Instead, her parents had sent her here, to spend the summer with a great-grandfather who she barely knew, who she was sure hated her. Here, isolated geographically and technologically. You would swear he lived in like the 1990s, she thought bitterly. He had no computer, no internet, his only contact with the outside world a land line phone, and a letter box in town. And the town was so small, it wasn’t even on the map. Once a week, he would drive the two hours each way, do his grocery shopping and collect his mail, returning home as silent and sullen as ever.

So, Lise stomped up the stairs to the attic of his house, trying to find something - anything - to do. She had looked at his collection of DVDs, now so outdated that she didn’t know how to use the archaic DVD player linked to TV. All the movies he had were old, from like the 2020’s and she thought they looked totally boring. A few of the actors looked familiar, but she assumed that it was from channel hopping, seeing snippets of classic movies on one of the golden oldies stations.

She had only been here a week, and already she was bored. And, if she was bored, unhappy, she was going to do anything in her power to make sure that everyone around her was, too. The attic she stomped up to was littered with boxes, furniture, and dust. There were no footprints, and she could only assume that no one had been here in a very long time. She walked into the room, watching as her feet stirred up the dust, kicking it and seeing the motes highlighted in the sunlight coming in from the large gable windows.

Moving further into the room, Lise started to open boxes at random. Most were filled with old clothing, kids toys, the things that people accumulated over years of life. Her great-grandfather had lived here as long as she could remember, and she doubted that he had cleaned the attic out in that time.

As she continued into the attic, one box caught her eye. The rest of the boxes were cardboard, hastily shut up, sealed with packing tape and labelled in an unfamiliar hand. This box, about half way into the room (in the heart of the room she thought), was different. It was an old traveling trunk, made of a stamped metal, dented with use, with a curved lid, and a padlock through the
Kneeling in front of the box, she felt her interest pique. She wondered what was in the trunk that made it so special, made it warrant locking. Reaching out, she tugged at the padlock, and fell back in surprise when it came away in her hands. She realised that it only looked like it had been locked.

Regaining her balance, she leaned forward, freeing the clasp of the latch, opening the lid.

The box was filled with clothing, and books. Reaching in, she picked up a bundle of books, bound together with a lilac ribbon. Looking at them, she carefully ran her hands along the spines, noticing the different sizes, colours and textures of the books. The top book was red, with a chocolate book under it. In the middle was one of two olive books, sandwiching a navy book. Some were fabric coated, others leather.

Carefully, Lise untied the ribbon holding them together. She drew the ribbon away from the books, carefully placing it in the trunk. It was old, and clearly important to someone. She may be cranky, but she wasn’t heartless or careless. She gently placed the pile of books on the ground, and picked up the top book. As she opened it up, a letter fell out of its pages.

Placing the red book back with the others, she picked up the letter. One side seemed to be covered with a fairytale, while the other seemed to have a letter written by some unknown, probably long dead hand. The paper seemed old, fragile, and so she held it carefully as she began to read.

~~*****~~

Once upon a time, there was a prince of the great land of the South-East Teks, and a princess from the southern lands of Strailie. Their lands were very different. Both lands had very different customs and traditions. Both the prince and the princess were very young, but filled with great potential. In order to expose these two royal children to a broader world view, their parents sent them both away, expecting them to learn about other customs and other ways of viewing the world and its citizens. These two royals were expected to learn from their new foreign experiences and then come back to rule their kingdoms.

Little did their parents know, but the prince and princess were destined to meet. As they travelled through the strange new lands, they found their paths crossed for a short time. Recognising kindred spirits, the prince and princess developed a friendship that quickly blossomed into love. They spent every waking moment together, dreading the day that they must part. But knowing, accepting that this must happen, for the good of their kingdoms.

Parting was sad for the prince and princess, and both shed tears for their loss. They continued on their tours, each a little sadder and wiser. Two months after the prince and princess parted ways, the princess realised that she was pregnant. The baby was the prince’s. She tried to contact him, but was unable to get any messages to him.

Without the support of the prince, she turned to her two best friends to help her through the pregnancy. When the princess’s daughter was born, all three agreed that she was the most beautiful thing any of them had ever seen. A gift. These two friends became godparents to the little girl, loving her and showering her with gifts.

The princess returned home, with her baby, ready to begin to rule her kingdom. The king and queen, upon finding out about their granddaughter, were outraged. They insisted that the princess give her baby away, threatening to banish her if they didn’t. Horrified by her parent’s threats, the princess fled the kingdom with her daughter, running to a life that, while not of poverty, was not the decadence that the princess was used to. Her parents, realising that she had fled, striped her of
her title, forbidding anyone in the kingdom to speak of her.

The princess, dethroned and without her parent’s support, turned to two more of her friends. They took her in, loved her, and the baby. As the princess’s daughter grew, these two friends also became godparents. So, the princess’s daughter had not two but four godparents watching over her. Protecting and loving her.

The princess loved the little girl very much, and while she was sad for the loss of her prince, would not have changed anything. Her little girl was the centre of the world, the most precious thing in her life.

*****

Pondering the words that seemed familiar, and yet foreign to her, Lise turned the page over, and began to read the second side.

*****

My darling daughter, for your entire life, I have told you the story of your mother and father as a fairee tale, because that’s what the time I spent with your father felt like to me. My very own fairee tale. When you were little, I whispered it to you every night before you went to sleep. In the last few years I haven’t needed to tell you as often. You haven’t needed to hear it to get to sleep anymore. But, please never forget my fairee tale. I mean every word of it. He was my prince, and he made me feel like a princess.

You truly are the greatest gift I was ever given. I would not trade your life for anything, not more time with your father, not my relationship with my parents, not even my own life if that was the stakes.

You are more intelligent than I could ever hope, more beautiful than I could ever imagine. Like me, you fast tracked through school and graduated even younger than I did. I always wondered if it was the right decision to let you do that, to deprive you of the social interaction that can only be gained from spending time with your peers. But, I should have known not to worry. I know that you may have questioned some of my decisions over the years, but everything I did, I did for you.

You willingly accepted the fairee story that I told you over your childhood, even after you stopped believing in fairees, Santa Claus, the Easter bunny and even the monsters under the bed. But I believe I owe you more.

I owe you the truth.

So, on the eve of your college education, I give you these three books.

This book contains the full story of your birth, of my life. It is unfinished, I know, but hopefully it will help answer any questions you may have. I may cross into things that make you uncomfortable, and for that I apologise. But I think that everything in this book is important for you to know, important for you to understand. None of the things this book will tell you makes my faireetale any less true. It simply gives the story more body.

This is, I understand, an unconventional gift. The red book I wrote over the last week, while the chocolate leather book came into my possession barely three weeks ago. It was written by your father. The third book, the olive one, is still blank, ready for you to fill with your life. Because you, my darling girl, are going to have an amazing life.

I start my new job today, and that means leaving you alone in this city where you don’t know
anyone yet. I don’t want to leave you alone, but know I have to. I don’t want you to have to entertain yourself in this unfamiliar place for the next month, but have resigned myself to the fact you will have to.

I just hope that these will help to fill the time.

So, my darling girl, here is the truth.

Love, forever, your mother

Xoxo

Carefully putting the letter down, Lise was confused by the feeling of de ja vue that reading the fairee tale had caused. It sounded familiar, as if she was meant to remember it. She shook her head, trying to clear the feeling. Laying the letter carefully down, she picked up the red book, the one the letter urged the unknown darling daughter, and began to read.
Chapter Notes

Y’all know the characters that aren’t mine. I’m just playing with them for a while....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My darling daughter.

A lot can happen in 14 months. A lot happened in the fourteen months I was overseas, traveling and on exchange for university. Your life can go from being right on track, meeting your expectations, to veering so far off course that you’re not even sure what the course was to start with. That’s what happened to me.

At seventeen, half way through my undergrad degree, my course was planned out in front of me: I would finish my degree, then do post-grad medicine or law, and then move far away from my parents. We would stay in touch, sending the obligatory cards and presents for birthdays, Christmas, mothers and fathers days, and the occasional phone call, but overall, our contact would be limited. Limited, but still there. I assumed that there would be boyfriends, and eventually a husband in there. And dogs, four or five of them.

I never wanted children. I must make that clear. Not once had I fantasized, dreamed or even thought about having children. My plan was very children free. I do not say this because I regret your existence, or anything that led up to it. You have made my life infinitely better. But, until you were conceived, I didn’t want children. I saw them as messy, sticky, and I was selfish with my time. I didn’t want anything that would distract me from what my goals in life were. You changed that, altering me irrevocably.

I was not a saint as a child. In classes several years above my physical age, I was exposed to many things earlier than I should have been. In classes with people three and four years my senior, it was almost to be expected. My first sexual experience was when I was fourteen, in my final year of college. You must remember that I was educated in Australia, where college is the last two years of American high school. I lost my virginity at sixteen, in the summer break between my first and second years of university.

Please bear with me, my darling. This account of our lives will contain things that you probably don’t ever want to know about me. My sexual activity for one thing. But, it’s necessary for your understanding, necessary for my ability to accurately tell the story. So, please forgive me when I say things you’d rather not know.
I went on the pill when I was sixteen, and used condoms religiously. Both of these things remained a secret from my parents. Contraception is not acceptable in their eyes, because sex should be for procreation, as part of a stable marriage between a man and a woman. I know that neither the pill or condoms are perfect, and that really no sex at all is the only method guaranteed to make sure that you don’t get pregnant. But, I liked boys and I enjoyed sex. So, I did everything I could to minimise the risk of pregnancy. Despite this, or perhaps in spite of this, statistically speaking, there is an eight percent failure rate for the pill, and a twelve percent failure rate for condoms. These aren’t the ideal rates that they tell you if everything is perfect, and you live in a pristine laboratory, and take everything exactly at the right time. These are the reported, real life statistics. Combined, this gives us a .0096 percent failure rate. But you know what that really means?

That for every ten thousand times that people have sex using both condoms and the pill, ninety-six times someone will end up pregnant anyway.

I was one of those ninety-six.

I was so young when I started my degree that I was unable to take the gap year that is almost a right of passage in Australia. I would have loved to travel Europe before starting my degree, but I was not even old enough to fly unaccompanied on most airlines, let alone travel alone. Instead, I decided to go on an exchange program during my degree.

I spent the first two and a half years working my butt off. My employers knew I was much younger than any other uni student, but I worked so hard that they never had reason to complain. And, because I was under eighteen, they were able to pay me lower wages, cutting their budgets nicely. I studied full time and worked full time, saving most of my pay so that I could go on exchange. I planned to change hemispheres for the year of my exchange, giving myself an extended break after I finished at my home university, and before I needed to be at the new university. My exchange university was very accommodating, allowing me to go on exchange as a third year student even though I was only seventeen. Several other universities had stated that because I was still a minor, I would be unable to live in dorms, making it almost impossible for me to attend them.

In giving myself a long break between the first semester study in Australia, and second semester study in England, I ended up with almost two months to spare. I worked the first fourteen days of straight, before spending two days packing, and flying out of the country. I had chosen to fly on one of the few airlines that would allow me to fly unaccompanied, and on multiple, indirect flights. And the only one that would allow me to leave the airports at my stops without being collected by someone. I had almost six weeks to travel in before I had to be on campus. I choose to use them to the fullest of my abilities, visiting four countries in three continents in that time, spending about two weeks in each. In each country, I would go on a tour - a week or ten days - and spend a few days with friends. I know it probably seems odd that someone who had never left the country, who was only seventeen, had friends spread across the globe, but as a combination of meeting people on exchange at my home university, the international students from college, and people I knew from
the online communities I was a part of, I knew people in quite a few countries. I tried to visit as many of them as possible before I started my exchange. I arrived at university exhausted and excited, ready for the challenge of new people, dorm living, and a new set of classes.

I thought my time traveling was perfect.

I had seen amazing sights, met some unique people and had hundreds of photos to bore my friends back home with. I visited New Zealand, and toured the North Island. I visited Japan, and saw stone Buddhas, Hiroshima and Tokyo.

On the Canadian tour, I met a guy I immediately clicked with, and we had had a fling. He was gorgeous, just turned eighteen, and taking the same tour as I was before he started his degree in the fall. He still didn’t know what he wanted to major in, and I was almost envious of his carefree, relaxed spirit, his ability to choose. He was Texan, and we both knew that we were never going to see each other again. We knew the parameters, the limits of our relationship, and perhaps because of that, the entire experience was better than it otherwise would have been. I certainly felt freer around him than I ever had before, sexually.

The tour had the option of single or twin rooms, depending on your preference. They segregated the sexes, unless you specifically asked to stay with someone. If you opted for a twin room and there was no one else of your sex on the tour, you got a single room for the twin price. Which was what happened to me. Everyone else had requested either single rooms, or specific room mates. I hadn’t, so the tour company put me in a room by myself. Most of the places we stayed put me in rooms with these luxurious queen beds, and the first night I was amazed at the space I had.

The second night, I may as well have been sleeping in a single bed for the amount of space we occupied. But I digress.

I have always been shy, and my accelerated education didn’t really equip me with the worlds best social skills. It usually takes me a few days to warm to new people enough to have a proper conversation with them. But when he sat down next to me, I immediately felt at ease. We talked about everything and nothing, sitting next to each other on the bus, parting only to sleep. The first night on tour was the only one that I spent alone.

The second morning, of the tour, we ate breakfast together, and again the conversation was easy, natural, and so sexy. I flirted shamelessly, and was astounded when he flirted back.

Every detail of that second night has been forever etched into my memory. I cannot forget what happened between us, nor do I want to.
That night, we ate dinner with the rest of the group before going for a walk. The night sky was beautiful, and he pointed out the unfamiliar stars to me, standing behind me and holding me close so that I could follow the line of his arm. As he held me, I slowly pressed myself into him, unable to contain myself, thoroughly turned on by the raw sex appeal dripping from his voice, the twang that coloured his words. Leaning down, he lowered himself to my height, holding my face tenderly in his hands as he kissed me, softly at first but with growing passion, increasing desire.

I don’t know how we managed to make it back to the hotel, but I was thankful that I had the room to myself. As we fell onto the bed, I could feel him tugging at my clothing, pulling my shirt over my head, as I pulled at his, fumbling with the belt buckle he wore, the one that made me laugh every time I saw it. Although he assured me that it was traditional Texan, the size struck me as ridiculous. I had teased him about using it as compensation, but as I managed to pull his jeans past his hips I realised that he didn’t need to compensate.

I had never understood the attraction of overly large dicks. My darling girl, please promise me that you will wait until it is legal for you to find out. And please, please promise me that you will be safe. You have to protect against STIs as well as pregnancy. And I know, oh so well, that protection isn’t perfect. But please, please promise me. But I’m letting myself get sidetracked again. Sorry. And, if you feel the need to bleach your brain later, I won’t argue. But, in some ways, this is as important to the story as anything else. His huge dick. To a certain extent, I still don’t understand the appeal of large dicks. I mean, if they are too long, they can hurt when he presses against your cervix, and if they are too wide, they can tear as they go in. Ever since overhearing girls in my year ten classes talking about their first times with their boyfriends, the reverence that a large appendage had been held in had baffled me.

Until I saw his.

He was large, but not disproportionally. Already standing at attention, he was amazing. I reached out to him, eager to touch, as he finally managed to pull my skirts around my ankles. I kicked the off, away from myself, realising that not only had he managed to remove my skirts, but he had also removed my top, bra and underwear. I stood naked in front of him, watching as he surveyed my body. Unused to such intense scrutiny, I stepped towards him, wrapping my fingers behind his head and continuing the kissing we had started earlier. Tensing my legs, I jumped up, wrapping my legs around his hips, feeling the comforting hardness of his erection brush along my wet slit. His eyes widened as he felt how wet I was, and his dick twitched in anticipation.

Walking forward, he reached the bed, lowering my down so I lay with my hips on the edge. Leaning back, he widened the gap between our bodies, trailing kisses down my ribs, across my breasts, as his hands ghosted across my stomach, moving lower and lower until he reached my aching clit. My hips bucked as his fingers brushed over it, and he smiled at me. Reaching behind him, he carefully unwrapped my legs from around his torso. Leaning forward, he planted kisses on my belly, until he was kneeling between my legs. Carefully placing my feet on his shoulders, he
pushed my legs apart. I let them fall open, giving him an unrestricted view of me.

He moved his kisses lower, teasing me as he kissed my inner thighs, abdomen, brushing his fingers in my pubic hair as my breathing became more erratic. When I thought I couldn’t stand the suspense anymore, he kissed me right where I wanted him to. Lazily he drew his tongue along my inner lips, and I once more marveled at how wet I was already. Continuing his tongue’s journey, he licked up towards my clit, eventually running the length of his tongue, gloriously along my clit. I sucked a sudden breath in with pleasure, and he repeated the motion. As I pressed my hips upwards, aching for more friction, he sucked my clit into his mouth, I cried out, my breathing becoming more and more erratic as I felt myself moving closer to climax.

Clutching the sheets, I felt my toes curl, and found myself doing something I’d never done before. As I came, I screamed his name in ecstasy.

“FUCK, JASPER!”

Darling girl, never, ever, let a boy make you believe that your orgasm is any less important than his.

Grinning wickedly, Jasper slowly moved my feet off his shoulders, and reached beneath me, lifting my limp form further up the bed. Gently lowering my head onto the pillows, he slowly, lazily kissed up my stomach, flicking his tongue over my nipples, kissing my collar bones and the sensitive pot beneath my ear before finally returning his mouth to mine. I could taste myself on his lips, and while I had always been repulsed by the thought of my own taste, I found it highly erotic on his lips.

As he hovered above me, I reached down, slowly grasping his hardened shaft between my hands. I started moving my hands up and down the shaft, watching as his eyes flickered with pleasure. Reaching behind him, I hooked one leg and an arm around his hovering body. Pushing myself up with my free arm, I shifted my weight, flipping us over so I now hovered above him. Moving my knees so they were just outside his hips, I lowered my body so my wet slit rubbed along his hardened cock. He gasped in pleasure, and I smiled as I slowly rubbed myself along him.

Teasing, I ran myself along his length, stopping just before the end of his dick reached my vagina, feeling him twitch in anticipation. Planting kisses on his torso, I marveled at the beauty of his muscles, the perfection of his body. I was amazed at the intricate pattern of scars that ran along his upper body and arms, running my fingers along the crescent shaped lines. Despite these physical flaws, he was perfect.
I continued to grind myself onto him, reveling in the sensation it was causing. My breath shortened, and I felt my muscles beginning to contract as my movements stimulated my already receptive clit. Groaning, he tried to form words, clearly enjoying himself too. “That... Fe...eels so... good... Lilly.”

Leaning forward, I kissed his shoulder, carefully brushing my teeth on the sensitive muscles near his neck.

He stuttered, clearly anticipating what I was about to do. “Please,” he pleaded. That was all the hint I needed.

Opening my mouth, I bit down, sucking at the same time. I knew that it was going to leave a mark, but didn’t care. The mark was easily covered by a t-shirt, and would fade in time. In fact, I knew that by the end of the tour, it was likely to have disappeared entirely. (It was. However, I had replaced it with new marks.) As he gasped with pleasure, I kissed along his collar bone, before lifting my body off his, reaching forward to the nightstand that I had placed my toiletry bags on. He moaned with the loss of contact with my body, but I shushed him, moving back to where I had been sitting, handing him a small, foil packet.

“I need you inside me. And I need you to wear this.”

Nodding, he took the packet. I rolled onto my side, watching him slowly, carefully open the packet and slide the condom onto his dick. Smiling, he reached between my legs, covering his hand in my wetness before rubbing it along the length of his shaft. I smiled to see him using me for lube. I had never needed to use store bought lube, having plenty of my own. He flicked his thumb over my clit, and I gasped at the pleasure of the sensation. Carefully, he rolled me onto my side, so I was facing away from him. I felt him move in behind me, pressing the tip of his dick between my legs. Reaching between my legs, I guided him into my entrance, thankful that I was lying on my side. I knew from past experience that he was less likely to hurt me with his length in this position, and I was touched by his unspoken concern.

As he entered me, we both gasped with surprise. He filled me so perfectly that for a moment I forgot that soon we would have to part ways. He reached one hand over my body, his fingers carefully finding my clit as he started to rock within me. I rocked my hips back, matching his rhythm as he expertly stroked my clit. I what seemed like a matter of seconds, I felt my toes curl, and my walls begin to tighten. As I did so, I felt him begin to shake and realised that not only was I going to have an orgasm during intercourse, a rare experience for me, he and I were both nearing our climaxes.

As he stroked me, faster and harder, I cried out, encouraging him to come with me. I felt his body stiffen beside mine, and he bit down on my shoulder as he came. Seconds later, I came, once more
screaming his name in pleasure.

I felt him withdraw, and slowly rolled onto my back. My legs were tingling, and I knew there was no way that they would be able to support me if I tried to stand up. Grinning, I felt my eyelids drooping in sex-induced exhaustion. I watched as Jasper removed the condom, expertly tossing it into the small bedside bin. Pulling him back down towards me, I threw my leg over his stomach, pressing my body as close to his as possible. He wrapped his arms around me, and I felt him kiss my hair as I faded into a deep dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Statistics from: http://www.condomdepot.com/learn/detail.cfm/cid/131

It is actually fairly rare in Australia to skip grades. Not impossible, just very rare. So, I am taking some liberties with my home education system. Because of the timeline I wanted to set out, I need to have Lilly skip three grades. She graduated college at the age of 15. She turned 16 in her first year of university.
My dearest daughter, I can’t tell you how amazing it was to wake the next morning, and find myself in Jasper’s arms. We hadn’t moved since the previous night, and my body was still pressed against his. I knew it was early, but my body clock still hadn’t adjusted to the time difference between Canada and home. Or the other time zones I had been in before that. It didn’t seem to matter where I went, but it took me at least two weeks to wake up later than 6am local time. I had only been in Canada four days.

In addition, the litre of water I had drunk with dinner was making its presence known, screaming at me as I tried to go back to sleep. Sighing, I carefully shifted my weight, not wanting to wake Jasper who was in the correct time zone and would probably not appreciate the early hour. Glancing around, I tried to locate my watch, unable to remember if I had taken it off last night or if Jasper had. Reaching up to touch my neck, I confirmed that it had been taken off. I had never liked wearing things around my wrists, and as you know, I still don’t. So instead had, have a watch on a long necklace. You used to love to grab it as it swung, and I was always afraid that you would try to eat it and make it stop working. But you never did, and as you know, I still wear it. It is to long to sleep in, so usually I put it on my nightstand, next to the bottle of water I always kept there when I go to bed. That morning, I flicked my eyes up to the nightstand, and spied the familiar silver chain. I reached to pick it up, moving myself slowly off the bed. Jasper stirred, missing the feel of my body. I kissed his lips, and he seemed to settle again. Clicking the watch face open, I stared at the time. Like I had expected, it was before six am. What I had not expected was that it was ten to five. Glancing across at the window, I realised that the sun was only just rising. I also knew that there was no way I would be getting back to sleep.

Walking to the bathroom, I carefully closed the door, making sure to make as little noise as possible. I sat down on the toilet, and emptied my bladder, glad for the relief the action offered. Cautiously opening the bathroom door, I saw Jasper was still asleep, so decided that I would start my morning routine. My mouth felt awful for having neglected brushing my teeth the night before, so that became my primary focus. I was sticky and sweaty from the exertion the night before (although, it had been so worth it), so showering and washing my hair also seemed like a good idea. Much as I wanted to share the shower with Jasper, it was early and he had mentioned his hatred of mornings.

I crept back to the nightstand to grab my toiletries bag, and a clean pair of underwear from my backpack. Returning to the bathroom, I slowly shut the door, trying to make as little noise as possible. Turning on the shower, I watched the room steam up, glad to be awake before any strains were put on the hot water system. Unless the day had been above 30˚ Celsius, I could not cope with
cold showers. They had to be hot and streamy, the kind that made your skin turn pink and tingly. Stepping under the water, I began to wash my body, loosing myself in thoughts of the previous night.

Stepping out of the shower, I carefully dried my skin, and sluiced as much of the water as I could from my waist length hair. After pulling my underwear on, I stepped back into the room to begin my morning ritual. Picking up the bottle of baby oil, I poured a small amount into my hands, carefully massaging it into my breasts. Working down my body, I massage my stomach and lower back, shoulders and arms. I was just beginning to massage the lotion into my legs as Jasper’s eyes began to flicker open. Smiling, I continued with to massage my legs. Sleepily, Jasper looked at me, admiring my near naked body.

I picked my watch up from the nightstand and put it on before looking towards him. Smiling, I walked over to him, kissing his nose before starting to look for my discarded clothes from the previous night. Seeing my bra on the other side of the room, I padded over to it, reaching down to pick it up before putting it on. I slowly dressed, all the while being aware of Jasper’s eyes following my movements. Reaching for my watch, I was amazed to find that it was almost seven thirty. I hope that you find a boy who you can loose yourself in, loose your thoughts in. It is an amazing feeling, one that I cannot describe. I knew that the bus was due to be leaving at eight thirty and wanted breakfast before then, so I decided it was time to encourage Jasper to get out of bed, and showered.

“Morning gorgeous, its almost seven thirty. We have to leave in like an hour. Do you want a shower? There are towels in the bathroom… and would you like me to go grab you a coffee?” Leaning over to kiss him again, I saw him run his eyes over my body. “I enjoyed last night, but we need to get moving so we don’t miss the bus. Do you have plans for this evening?” I asked suggestively, hoping that he would play along with my game.

As he smiled, I saw he was going to play along. “Well, I was going to ask this gorgeous brunette out, but I’m afraid that she might have other plans. So, I think it will be a quiet night between me and my hand.”

“And if this brunette is free?”

“Well, I was thinking of a repeat performance.”

“Sounds perfect. Coffee?”

“Please. Black, double shot?”
“Coming right up.” I walked swiftly out the door, making sure I grabbed my room key and wallet on the way out. Breakfast wasn’t an inclusion on this tour, but the guide had pointed out a cafe and bakery the previous evening. Walking down the stairs, I quickly oriented myself, and headed to the bakery.

When I returned to my room a few minutes later, Jasper was sitting on the bed, flicking through the book that had been poking out of my bag. The book was one of my favourites, one that I read to you many times over your childhood. *The Gunslinger.*

“Sorry, I couldn’t help myself,” he said, motioning to the book in his hands. “Is it any good?”

“It’s one of my favourites. That is the first book in the series, there are seven in total.”

“Strange, I never picked you as a horror reader.”

“Oh, no, I’m not. That is fantasy. His horror works scare me shitless. That,” I motioned at the book in his hands, “enthralls me. I love the characters, they’re almost like friends I have read the books so often.” I passed the coffee to him, and offered him one of the croissants that I had gotten at the bakery.

Taking one, he replied. “How often?”

“The entire series? Maybe once a year. That is the smallest of the books, so it takes me about a month to read through the entire series each time… maybe six weeks?”

Nodding he started eating. I marveled at how he managed to eat the flaky pastry without dropping any of it on himself or on the bed he was still sitting on. Glancing at my watch, I realised that we were cutting it fine to catch the bus, and I really didn’t want to miss it. The Ottawa Parliament buildings were gorgeous, and I was looking forward to seeing Montreal.

Picking up my bags, I gathered them up and followed Jasper to his room where he changed his shirt before doing the same. We headed to the bus, loading our bags before climbing on board. The drive was short, compared to others on the tour, and we spent the entire time talking, before exploring downtown Montreal.
Once again, I had been placed in a single room with a queen bed. Thanking my luck, Jasper and I had dinner with the tour group before taking a walk through the streets around the cathedral.

The second night followed the same pattern as the first, with up walking and talking, before kissing each other and returning to the hotel. I will spare you the details of the remaining nights, but I will not hesitate to tell you that the sex was amazing, every time. Your father was a loving, passionate man. The sex on the second night lacked the urgency of that first night, but was just as passionate. Jasper made me cum three times, and I managed to get him off twice. Settling into his arms, I once again slept peacefully, happy in his arms.

For the rest of the our, we followed the same routine. I would wake up early, shower and dress. He would wake up, and as he showered I would get coffee and breakfast. During the days, we would walk around the places on our tours together, sometimes holding hands but always close to each other. Each night, we would take a walk, and then have sex back at the hotel. We visited Ottawa, Montreal, Boston, Ithaca and Niagara Falls before returning to Toronto. My flight left Toronto at 7pm the final day of the tour, and that morning we had blissful sex before boarding the bus.

Kissing him goodbye, I had shed a tear, but understood that we were returning to our real lives. I left him with my copy of the Gunslinger, and he gave me a cowboy hat that sat below my eyes. It now sits in a hat box in my wardrobe. It has travelled with me every time we moved, and every now and then I take it out and hold it, inhaling the long gone scent and thinking of your father. The hat was perfect the perfect memento for me to remember him by. We had decided to keep our entire relationship casual, and while we had talked about anything and everything, there was one piece of information that we had failed to exchange.

Our surnames. I was Lilly X, and he was Jasper X. Despite the attraction we felt, we both realised that it wasn’t going to go any further. I deeply regret this decision, regret that it meant he wasn’t in your life. But, as they say, hindsight is 20/20. With no ties to bind us, there was no need to exchange surnames.

Or so I thought.

Each of us had taken a photo with the other, and as I sat on the tarmac waiting for my plane to take off, I stared at his picture. He was gorgeous, and our encounter had been perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Note: the book series I am discussing here is Stephen King’s Dark Tower series. It is amazing, and really is my favourite book series.
It's due to be released as a film in 2017, which I'm kinda jazzed for.
My darling girl, when I arrived in England I took five days to travel from Heathrow airport to my university. As I travelled, I visited friends, and tried not to dwell on the experience with your father.

Arriving at university, I set about making my room my own. I was glad that my English university hadn’t adopted the American version of dorms, and that I had a room to myself. As I attended the orientation session, I felt unusually tired, but put it down to having changed time zones again, and waking up at five each morning. As classes started, my body clocked kicked into overdrive, and I seemed to want to sleep all the time. I felt sick, but as half of the people on my floor had what was referred to as the freshers flu, I put it down to simply displaying abnormal symptoms of whatever they all had.

In the second week, I had a massive craving for brownies, which is one of the best things to happen to me over that week. As you know, my brownie recipe makes a lot of brownies, so I usually only make it for parties where I can feed it to other people. I decided feeding people brownies was the best way to meet the other people on my floor. After making the brownies, I went door to door offering my floor mates brownies. Some happily accepted, some looked wary, and others were out. But, at the second last door, I found someone who not only seemed to want some, but who drew me into her room and started talking. We talked for almost five hours, snacking on brownies and getting to know each other. I smiled as I realised that I had been in her home city only a few weeks earlier on my tour - she lived in Ottawa, a city I had gotten a great vibe from.

She explained that while her name was Guinevere, she usually went by Vere. Her parents had Welsh background, and an obsession with the legend of King Arthur: her brothers were named Arthur and Lancelot. Her sister got off lightly, being named Anna, who is not only a minor character, but also a more normal name.

As we talked and ate, it got darker, until we realised that not only was it fully dark, but it was dinner time. Neither of us felt like eating anything after the brownies, so we wandered around the campus, for an hour. Returning to my room, my fatigue returned with a vengeance, and I fell into bed, sleeping for almost fourteen straight hours.

Waking up the next morning, I felt the most refreshed I had since arriving in England almost three
weeks earlier. As I attended my classes, I could feel the fatigue creeping back, and that night slept for almost twelve hours. Over the next few days, my sleep patterns returned to normal, and the symptoms of the fresher flu passed. I once again felt like myself, and found that not only had I managed to make friends with Vere, the guy down the hall from me, Addison, seemed to have become a friend. I love him immediately, thoroughly amused by his flamboyant nature, the way he chided my about my dress sense. Although, in my defense, half my clothing was still making its slow journey to me from Australia. He didn’t accept this, insisting on taking me shopping to get me looking ‘sexy and fuckable,’ as he so eloquently put it.

Learning that neither Vere or Ad were able to cook, I took them under my wing, cooking for them. They paid for ingredients while I provided the finished meals. Vere didn’t eat meat, so I didn’t cook any for nearly three weeks after taking them under my wings. It’s thanks to your aunt Vere that I became a vegetarian, finding that I had no desire to eat meat after my long hiatus. I relaxed this as you got older, adding chicken and fish to our diets, but I was never able to eat red meat again. Ad, Vere and I tended to eat late, after the kitchen had cleared, so I didn’t see anyone else cooking meat over the first few weeks of uni either. I was glad, because while I would eat red meat, the smell of it raw was unpleasant to me. The Sunday at the end of our fourth week at university, Ad decided he wanted a traditional roast - beef, potatoes, yorkshire puddings, gravy, the lot. I agreed, knowing that a roast was minimal preparation, and therefore minimal time dealing with raw red meat. I doubled the quantities of vegetables, and decided to make a stuffing cake as well, so that Vere also had something to eat before I set about preparing the meal. I had all the vegetables peeled and ready to go, and the stuffing cake in a bowl waiting to be put in the oven, when I pulled out the small roast we had bought.

Unwrapping the cut of local beef, I was assaulted by the smell of the meat. Dropping it onto the chopping board, I ran to the bathrooms and proceeded to empty my stomach. Groaning, I went in search of Ad. There was no way that I was going to be able to finish preparing the meat, and it couldn’t be left out. I assumed that my reaction was simply due to the fact I had not handled red meat since leaving Australia two and a half months earlier.

Sitting on the opposite end of the kitchen, I talked Ad through the preparation of the meat, making him wipe the chopping boards down three times before I would go anywhere near them.

Over the next month, random things would make me throw up, things that usually didn’t have any effect on me. I grew used to this, assuming that it was a lingering symptom of the fresher flu. Often, I would forget about these incidences during the day, as I otherwise felt fine. I was sleeping well, my appetite was fine and I was keeping up with my classes. Thinking that I might be having an allergic reaction, I carefully analysed my diet for almost three weeks, unable to find any common factor.

In early November, after once again throwing up, I realised that I had not had my period since mid August. This was not unusual for me, as I skipped at least once a year, despite being on the pill. I am deeply sorry if I have passed this trait on to you, my dear. However, I had skipped in both September and October, which I never did. I never skipped twice in a row. As I lay on the cool
bathroom tiles, waiting for my nausea to subside, I thought about this fact. I had already decided that the nausea was probably not a food allergy, and coupled with the fact I had missed my period two months in a row, I could only come to one conclusion.

I must be pregnant.

The though horrified me, and I burst into tears, curling up into the fetal position on the floor. I’m not sure how long I lay there, sobbing, but suddenly Vere was talking to me, asking what was wrong. I sat up, struggling with muscles that had seized from the cold and crying. Trying to collect my breathing enough to talk to her, I looked into her face, filled with concern.

“I *sob* th-think *hic* I *sob* might b-be *sob* pre-pregnan-nant,” I sobbed, leaning forward and burying my face in her curls. On the first day we met, we had talked about so many different things, one of them being children. I had made it very clear to her my opinions of pregnancy and having children. As she rubbed my back, offering comfort, she suggested that we go to my bedroom.

Still sobbing, I let her lead me back to my room. On the way, she knocked on Ad’s door, asking him to follow us. Seeing the state I was in, he wordlessly followed, shutting the door behind us as Vere led me onto my bed, sitting down and pulling me close to her.

Turning to Ad, she explained the situation. Despite his look of concern, I could see no judgement on his face. Quietly, Vere asked him to go into town, and get some pregnancy tests. “Three or four, and different brands?” she requested. Nodding, Ad left the room.

I had no concept of time passing, but at least 2 hours must have passed before Ad walked back into my room. Vere was still sitting on my bed, but I had lain down, my head in her lap. She had pulled my blanket over me, and sat stroking my hair. Ad passed her the bag that I assumed contained the tests.

“I got five different brands, I hope that’s okay?” he asked nervously, his eyes flicking from hers to mine.

“It is, thanks,” Vere replied. Pausing from stroking my hair, she examined each of the boxes. “Lilly, have you urinated yet today?”

Thinking hard, I shook my head. My breathing had normalised, and I was able to reply without my
“Words hitching. “Not today. I was sick first. Then you found me.”

“Prefect,” she replied. “Ad, do you want to wait here? We just need to make a quick trip to the ladies.”

I saw him nod as I numbly got out of bed and followed Vere to the bathroom. She handed me three tests and a cup.

“You need to fill the cup and pee on the ends of these sticks. Think you can manage that?”

Nodding, I headed into the toilet stall. My bladder gave a cheer of relief as I filled the cup and marked the sticks, as instructed. Opening the door to the stall, I handed the cup and sticks to Vere before washing my hands.

I turned back to her, surprised to hear a toilet flushing again. “We didn’t need everything from the cup, just enough to dip these two into,” she said in explanation, dropping the cup into the bin by the door.

She carefully guided me back to my room, and I sat on the bed once more, staring numbly ahead. I could hear her talking to Ad, but I was spaced enough that I couldn’t make out the words.

They walked up to me, and sat on either side of me. Vere handed me the sticks, and I turned each of them over. All five were marked as positive.

As I stared at the sticks, I said the only thing that was in my head.

“Fuck.”
My darling, you have always been loved. But, when I found out I was pregnant with you, my entire world view shifted. I was in a state of shock, numb to the world around me. I walked through the next few days in a daze. Vere and Ad chaperoned me to and from the doctors, the pharmacist and then back to the doctor to get medical certificates for my missed classes. I felt like I had been wrapped in cotton wool, everything was fuzzy and not quite in focus. Everything sounded distant, and slightly off kilter.

In that week, the only time I had felt anything but numb was when the doctor was discussing my options with me. Not that options is really the right way to describe the conversation we had.

I had been fairly passive for the appointment, and the doctor had taken it to mean that I didn’t want the baby. After the exam, she had tried to give me information packets of abortion and adoption. She gave me very little information about keeping it, merely prescribing me some vitamins and booking an appointment for me with an obstetrician.

She had explained that I was about ten weeks along, so I could no longer have a medical abortion. Instead, I could have a suction abortion until fifteen weeks, and a surgical abortion until eighteen weeks.

I had lost it then. Standing up, I threw the papers at her, yelling that there was no way I was having an abortion, no way that I could do that. What did she think I was?

I started firing obscenities at her, alternating between English and the few French swear words I had learnt. I saw her take a step backwards, and felt Vere’s arm on mine, pulling me out the door. Ad was apologising, trying desperately to make up for my outburst.

After the doctors appointment, I had reverted to my safe state of numbness. I didn’t realise until much later that the second doctor I saw was a different person to the first, was my gynecologist and obstetrician. I took the pills when Ad or Vere told me to, mechanically moving through my days. I continued to cook for them, but refused to deal with any meat. Vere didn’t mind this turn of events, but I think Ad missed the meat.
Seven days after Vere found me sobbing on the bathroom floor, I finally snapped out of my haze. I still can’t tell you what triggered it, but suddenly, I decided that I needed to start actually dealing with the situation. To be actively involved in the pregnancy, not just existing on autopilot.

Both Vere and Ad seemed extremely relieved to see me acting normally again. I was relieved that my morning sickness - as I now realised the random bursts of nausea were - seemed to have passed. Which made sense, I was eleven weeks pregnant, almost through the first trimester. I was relieved that I wasn’t showing yet, wanting to get some practical things completed before I started to tell people.

With Ad and Vere accompanying me for moral support, I talked to my college advisor, Kate. The university I was on exchange with aligned all of its students with one of the seven undergraduate colleges, or the postgraduate college. Mine was one of the smaller colleges, and I had met my college advisor once before, in the first week of term. She had seemed nice at the time, but I felt intimidated and scared to meet with her and tell her about my situation.

Our meeting went well, and she had left me feeling positive about my decision. We had talked through my due date and my class requirements, along with my academic and housing issues. The university in England worked on a trimester system, with two teaching terms and one exam term. I was due about half way through the exam term, but didn’t want to have to sit any exams for fear of going into early labour. Knowing that exchange students unable to attend the exam term were able to write additional essays instead, I asked Kate if it would be possible for me to do that with all my classes. She said that while she would have to check with my teachers, this didn’t seem like it would present a problem. There was a precedent after all. She suggested that we set a tentative final due date for all my assessment six weeks before the you were due.

Accommodation was a different issue. I had already paid for my dorm room until the end of the exam term, but was unsure that I would be able to stay there after giving birth. I was in a standard residence, not in one designed for families. Kate had written some notes, saying that she would get back to me. She needed to check the specific regulations, and get in touch with the residence officer for my college. But, even if I was unable to stay in residences for the exam term, she was pretty sure that my payment would be refunded, due to ‘special circumstances.’ Reassured that I would be able to complete my academic year without jeopardising my visa, I treated Ad and Vere to a meal out, to thank them for their support and help. I knew that I would never have been able to do this without them.

Ravenously, I began reading everything I could about pregnancy. I had been unawares for almost the entire first trimester, so I felt unprepared, unsure of how to proceed. I felt so young, and I guess I was, pregnant at seventeen. The only thing I was sure of was that I was going to get bigger, some time soon. I hoped that I would show really late in the pregnancy, but knew that there was no guarantee of this.
Feeling more proactive about the pregnancy, I slightly altered my morning routine. Now, instead of the baby oil I usually rubbed into the skin on my stomach and breasts, I used BioOil, hoping it would prevent massive stretch marks. I also started to pay far more attention to what I was eating, trying to ensure that I was getting enough nutrients to feed my you.

My baby.

It was still strange for me to say, and I had no idea how I was going to tell anyone at home. I was scared of my parents disapproval, of my friends reactions. My parents were strict Catholics, believing in no sex before marriage and no abortions. I was pretty sure that having an abortion was a worse sin in their eyes that the loss of my virginity, but it was a close call. They didn’t know about any of the guys I had slept with, or even any of the guys I had dated. My father had once threatened to disown me if he ever found a boy in my room. I didn’t know how serious he was about that, but figured that falling pregnant was worse than having a boy in my bedroom. I knew that I should tell my parents, but I kept putting the conversation off, telling myself I would ring them the next day, or the one after that.

Because I had realised my pregnancy so late in the first trimester, the original doctor had scheduled me the first available ultrasound appointment, in the middle of what she assured me was the twelfth week of my pregnancy. I went, apprehensive of what I would find, scared that the pregnancy wasn’t developing properly and would have to be aborted.

My fears were baseless however. I went, once again with Vere and Ad in tow, and the ultrasound showed a normally developing baby. The ob-gyn I had been referred to, Dr Masen (“But call me Liz, dear”) was the motherly type, and I warmed to her immediately. Or, she was the film mother type. Warm and cuddly, caring and beautiful. So different from my actual mother. Dr Liz performed a nuchal translucency scan, which showed almost no likelihood of Down Syndrome. While she recommended I also have a diagnostic test, it was not compulsory. I decided that I didn’t want to risk the one percent change I had of miscarriage from the diagnostic tests, so didn’t have a CVS or amniocentesis test.

My eighteenth birthday was a strange occasion. Usually the first time that I could legally drink (the drinking age in both Australia and the UK is eighteen), I couldn’t drink because of being pregnant. I’ve never been big on celebrating birthdays, and would have happily missed this one as well. But, Vere and Ad decided that I couldn’t miss it, that I was going to celebrate.

Somehow, they managed to organise a surprise party for me, with my friends from the orchestra and my classes. I still don’t know how they did it, but it was really fun. I hadn’t told anyone about my pregnancy yet, so Ad and Vere kindly provided me with ‘replacement’ drinks, so it looked like I was being the good little eighteen-year-old, without hurting you. I made sure to drink slowly, so
that I wouldn’t have to go through the charade of being drunk. That was just going too far.

All the gifts I got were thoughtful, and sincere, and small enough to take home. My parents, as usual, sent me a nice, religious, Catholic gift. Or, more correctly, what they thought was a nice religious, Catholic gift. I didn’t believe then, any more than I do now. For my eighteenth, it was a pair of gold and garnet cross earrings. Beautiful, but not something I would ever wear. And, of course, not that I even wear gold. At least for my eighteenth, I didn’t have to act surprised and happy with whatever religious thing they gave me. And, of course, that was the last birthday gift they ever gave me.

As Christmas approached, I started to worry about what I would be doing. My parents had decided to spend the summer doing missionary work, thus leaving me to my own devices for the holiday. Sensing my apprehension, Vere had enquired about what was on my mind. As I explained to her, I cursed the pregnancy hormones screwing with my emotions. The simple action of talking about Christmas, and not having anyone to spend it with, made me burst into tears. Again.

Smiling, Vere invited me to join in on her plans. Her brothers would be across from Canada, and they were planning to do a bit of travel, and meet up with family friends in Paris and Madrid. With her offer, my emotions once more flipped, and I found myself smiling at her, happy and at ease.

While the airlines we were using allowed pregnant women to travel up to thirty five weeks, I made an appointment for one week before we were due to fly, just to check that everything was going okay. Knowing how young I was, Dr Liz had tried to find out as much of my history as possible. When I went in, Dr Liz smiled at me, having heard the full situation including about your father, and my parents religious beliefs.

“You’re lucky to have such dear friends, Lilly. Those two are really standing behind you. Don’t forget that. They will support you no matter what, I think. And, you are fine to fly. This is my emergency medical mobile number, so if you have any problems or concerned while you are in Spain or France please call me.” She handed me a piece of paper with a neatly written phone number on it. Smiling, I left her office, glad to have found such a supportive doctor. She made me almost feel like I could do this, that I could be a single mum.

When I returned to my dorm, I found a note taped to my door. Opening it, I read with growing excitement. Smiling widely, I raced down the hall to Ad’s room, knocking on his door and dragging him after me to Vere’s room. Barging through her open door and shutting it behind me, I handed her the note.

“I can stay! Kate has worked it all out for us! Eeep!” I couldn’t help but bounce slightly in excitement. Until I received Kate’s note, I hadn’t realised just how much the worry about accommodation had been weighing on my shoulders.
“We know, Kate came and talked to us while you were out. She wanted to talk to you in person, but was leaving for her holidays this afternoon, and we weren’t sure when you would be back from your appointment with Liz.” Smiling, she pulled me into a hug. “There were going to be two empty rooms on this floor for the rest of the year, and Kate has organised it so that they not only stay empty, but act as a buffer. Cos you are already right at the end of the corridor, you don’t have to move, but Ad and I will have to move rooms, and so do the people next to you, but it means that we will have the rooms next to each other, and when the baby is born, you can bring it home here. You can’t stay any longer than the end of exam term, but the little one should be a month old by then and able to fly, all things going well.”

“And if things don’t go well, then you can just come home with me until you are able to fly or whatever,” Ad interjected.

Smiling at my two friends, I pulled them both into a hug. “Today is totally a great day. I can fly, and I have somewhere to bring my baby home to! Let’s go celebrate, who feels like some decadent cake and milkshakes at A Slice of Heaven?”

Nodding, both my friends followed me to the cafe, and we sat chatting about idle stuff while we ate and drank. The term came to an end, and Ad and Vere eagerly packed up their stuff and moved into the newly vacated rooms next to mine. I fell a little in love with Kate over that week. Not only had she arranged so that I could stay on campus when my baby was born, but she had arranged access to the two empty rooms for us. She said that we were allowed to move any of the furniture, so long as it was returned at the end of the year.

Knowing that sleep was going to be a problem for me over the coming months, I took advantage of the extra furniture, and moved my desk out of my room, into one of the spare rooms, and moved an armchair and extra bed in. The two single bed frames meant that I had a much bigger area to sleep on. I invested in some King sized bedding, and including a mattress overlay to hide the join in the mattresses.

Three days after the end of term, Vere and I flew to Paris where we met up with her brothers and family friends. We spent a week there, exploring and being tourists, before catching a sleeper train to Madrid. Vere, Lancelot, Arthur and I filled an entire cabin, making me less nervous about sleeping on the train. We spent another week in Madrid, before flying to Edinburgh for New Year’s Eve. Ad was meeting us there, and together we were planning to celebrate Hogmanay. We had found a great little B&B, and the owners were so helpful, giving us advice on what to see, where to go, what to eat and when to do it all. Despite knowing that I had to be back at uni by the fourth for an ultrasound, I had a wonderful time over Christmas, not missing my parents once.

As we parted company with Vere’s brothers, and headed back to campus, I felt a pang of guilt. We
had parted armed with each other’s contact information, were facebook friends, had phone numbers and email addresses, last names. Why could I not have done the same thing with Jasper? I wondered.

In the fortnight between arriving back on campus, and school starting, Vere, Ad and I slipped into a routine. I was craving bacon and maple syrup, pancakes and french toast. Each morning, I would wake up and prepare a huge hot breakfast, waking them up with hot coffee (which smelt amazing, but I had to avoid caffeine) and the breakfasts. We would move off to do our separate things during the days, which for me was furiously writing essays, completing the first term subjects. In the evenings, we would congregate in my room, watching movies or just sitting and talking crap.

As well as my schoolwork, I was busy writing lists of everything I needed for you, everything I needed to do. One list still only had a single item on it. Tell my parents. I didn’t know why I was still putting it off, but I was. Vere had asked me about it, but I couldn’t bring myself to pick up the phone and make that call. Truth be told, I was terrified of my parents reaction, but I kept telling myself it was simply that they were still off doing their missionary work. My reactions and fear was justified, in the end.

When the second term started in the middle of January, I still hadn’t started showing. I was about twenty weeks along, and I simply looked like I had gained a few kilos over winter. Then, almost overnight, in the second week of term I had a noticeable baby bump. My jeans still fit, but I wasn’t sure how long for.

In each of the classes I was taking that term, I had discussed with the teacher about an alternate assessment plan. Most of these involved writing an extra essay, although one of them required me to run a seminar later in the term. I was dreading that, but at the same time oddly exhilarated. The class was small, eight people plus the teacher, and they all seemed friendly. This term, I only had one class that gave straight lectures. I made sure to sit at the back of the lecture theatre, knowing that at some point soon I would be needing to go to the bathroom constantly. That class was also the only one where I didn’t explain my situation. All my other classes were fifteen people or less, and I explained that I needed a seat by the door because I was pregnant and needed to go to the toilet all the time. My classmates were accepting of this, and I was glad not to be judged. Now that I was showing, it was almost easier to tell people. I looked the part, so it was more believable than before.

Between attending my classes and doing my school work, doctors appointments, as well as the Bradley method classes I was attending at the local hospital, I was constantly busy. Ad and Vere were both attending the Bradley classes with me, and were both going to be present at the birth, and to help me afterwards. In the evenings, Vere, Ad and I continued to have movie nights, catching up on the days events.

They felt like my family, more than my blood relations ever had.
As I continued to grow, I found it was taking me longer and longer to get anything physical done. Near the end of February, we had a week off classes - a study break. Instead of studying, I used it as a shopping break. I had decided that before I got huge and couldn’t face the stores and couldn’t fit behind the wheel to drive a car, Ad, Vere and I should go on a shopping expedition. We borrowed a car from a floor mate who was going to Poland for the study break, and set off. We decided to make a decent trip of it, taking the Thursday and Friday before and the Monday after off, giving ourselves twelve days to explore the country a little. There were a couple of outlet malls I wanted to visit, and we had arranged to visit Tintagel and Stonehenge before heading back home. The drive was slow, mainly because I had to stop every hour or so to empty my bladder. Ad and Vere didn’t seem to mind though, and we had an awesome trip.

At the malls, I had managed to pick up most of the things I would need for you, and both Ad and Vere had insisted on buying me other things. Knowing that my visa expired after the school year officially ended, I didn’t want to invest in too many big ticket items - strollers, car seats and so on. Instead, I found my two favourite purchases. At one of the outlets, there had been hug-a-bub baby slings half price, and at another there were traditional ring slings at three for the price of two. Knowing how useful each of these would be, I eagerly bought them. I also got baby clothes, accessories, toys, and bottles. I knew that babies needed a lot of stuff, but I wanted to minimise what I bought, rather than having to ship it home. I visited hundreds of thrift stores to find your clothing, knowing that I would be donating it back in a few short months time anyway.

By the time we arrived back on campus, it seemed that everyone knew that I was pregnant. I was showing more and more, and grateful that summer was coming. With summer on the way, I was able to be less reliant on jeans for warmth. Most of my skirts still fit me by sitting low on my hips, below my growing bump, and I had stocked up on basics like long singlets and t-shirts to cover the ever expanding bulge. Vere had found me a collection of the most comfortable skirts I had ever worn. They stretched to fit my belly, I could wear them as a dress if I wanted, and they were organic cotton. Everything I could need, in one handy skirt. I still buy them today, pleased that the stockist is still in business and selling them.

My pregnancy was advancing well, and Dr Liz was happy with my weight and progress. I was feeling more and more sluggish, but knew that this was normal. My ultrasounds were normal, and I had decided I wanted to be surprised by your sex. I had mainly purchased green and purple and lemon clothes on my shopping expedition, knowing that I could dress you in either colour.

I was eating more and more, but thankfully was not yet experiencing baby brain. So, when Vere dragged me off campus one day in March, claiming that I had forgotten a massage booked weeks ago, I was mildly concerned. The massage parlor had several options for pregnant women, and it seemed that I had not only booked, but paid for one of these nearly a month earlier.

As we returned to campus, I felt relaxed and pampered, no longer worried that my brain was beginning to go. Walking back into my room, I was shocked to find it filled with people. I turned
to Vere, who grinned wickedly.

“Surprise! We thought you needed a baby shower.”

Looking around the room, I found myself surrounded by my friends from my classes. As I felt myself begin to tear up, I was gently pushed to sit on one of the armchairs.

It was surrounded by presents.

Overawed, I was unable to speak, instead gazing around the room at my friends. Vere and Ad walked up, taking the seats one either side of me. Gently placing one of the presents in my hands, Ad encouraged me to open it.

“We don’t have games organised, but if you don’t start opening presents soon, we can come up with some. And they will be embarrassing,” he said, emphasising the word embarrassing. Blushing I quickly complied. I wasn’t a big fan of being the centre of attention, so anything I could do to avoid embarrassing baby shower games was fine by me. “Plus,” he added, almost as an after thought, “the quicker you open presents, the quicker we can get to the cake.”

Smiling, I began opening the presents, thanking each person for each one. My friends had gotten me the most amazingly thoughtful gifts, all designed for travel. So, I didn’t have to worry how I was going to get them home. After all the gifts had been opened, Vere handed me a final envelope. “This is from all of us. It is a prepaid box, up to thirty kilos, to send back to Australia. You just need to ring the number at the bottom and someone will come and pack it for you, and take it away to be sent.”

Tearing up, I threw my arms around her neck. “Thank you,” I sobbed. “Thanks to all of you.” One of them handed me a box of tissues.

As I calmed down, Vere and Ad clearly decided that it was time to move on with the event. “Who’s up for cake?” they asked almost simultaneously, laughing as Ad claimed jinx.

Everyone clamoured to help them, and soon my room was covered with food. Not only was there my favourite cake from A Slice of Heaven (“A gift from Tony the owner. He said to wish you congratulations,” Ad confided), they had baked my brownies, and created a huge fruit salad. Everything was served with ice cream and whipped cream, and to me, it was pure heaven.
As plates of food were passed around, I noticed that one of my walls had been covered with a white sheet. When I enquired about this, Ad jumped up. “Oh! I almost forgot! Onto the next stage of the festivities!”

I was ushered onto my bed, and propped up with pillows before being joined by my friends, who covered my floor, bed and arm chairs. I was handed a stack of DVDs, and told to pick. Flicking thought the collection, I pulled one out. There really was no contest. While it was not my favourite movie of all time (an honour, as you know, given to a gorgeous French movie, Spanish Apartment, and its sequel Russian Dolls), I loved it.

“The Holiday it is!”

I looked up, and saw that there was a projector mounted behind my head. “Always pays to be friends with the geeks, didn’t you know?” He said, winking. If I knew him, I guessed that he was more than friends with some of them. Lucky bastard, I hadn’t been with anyone since Jasper.

As I settled back to watch the movie, it dawned on me that I really could do this, I really could be a single mother, that despite what my parents thought, I was going to fill your life with love and affection.
My beautiful daughter, the time before your birth was filled with my friends, two people who loved me dearly. I was so blessed to meet them to have them in my life.

Over the holidays between the second term and exam term, Ad, Vere and I went on one final trip. We decided to skip any trip to the continent, as I was only able to fly for the first two weeks of our month long holiday. Dr Liz (and airline regulations) refused to allow me any longer. So, we flew to Ireland, with plans to catch a ferry back to the UK.

I grew up in a drought zone. The drought was declared when I was about eight, and by the time I turned eighteen, had been going on for almost ten years. It lasted a total of thirteen years. Having lived in a drought zone for so long in Australia, I am still amazed by anywhere that rains enough to have luscious, green grass. Ireland had green grass in abundance. We travelled by a mix of bus and train, as well as hiring a car for the first week of the trip. I had insisted on this, knowing that I would be too large to fit behind the steering wheel after that, and wanting to see the cliffs of Moher. All the accommodation was a few kilometres at least from the cliffs, and there was no way that I could walk that far any more.

Vere insisted we visit the Blarney stone, so I dutifully (and slowly) climbed the steps to the roof. I even kissed the stone, being carefully held by the lovely old gentleman guarding the stone. Amazed at the photograph, I bought it despite the outrageous cost. I hoped that my kiss would give you the gift of the gab, something I was sorely lacking.

Since I had started showing, I had refused to let anyone take pictures of me that went any lower than my bust. The head shots allowed me to post the photos for my parents to see, without having to tell them about my pregnancy. Ad and Vere both frowned at my decision, but went along with it. The only exception to the rule were the photos I had Vere take every morning. In the photos, I was wearing only my bra and underwear, and I planned to compile them into a film strip eventually. Each day my belly got a touch bigger, and it was amazing to see the transformation. I had had her start taking them the day I snapped out of my daze.

During the Ireland trip, Vere and Ad were careful not to let me exert myself too much. They had clearly been talking to Dr Liz about me, and while I was touched at their love, I sometimes wished that they would stop mollycoddling me. I choose to hold my tongue though. In each destination, we
had arranged triple share rooms. Occasionally, this meant three single beds, but usually it meant a
double and a single. They insisted I take the double each time, and would alternate who shared
with me and my kicking, blanket stealing and bed hogging. I loved them a little bit more for that.

In the month before I gave birth to you, my darling, I was uncomfortable just about all the time. Dr
Liz had assured me I was in a healthy, normal weight range for pregnancy, but I felt huge. I was
glad not to have class, or assessment to deal with. Instead, I busied myself planning what I would
do after you were born. All going textbook perfect, I had a month between giving birth and having
to vacate my residence. Ad once again assured me that if I needed to, could come live with him for
a little while. Vere also offered that I could come and stay with her after the baby was born, once
she returned to Canada. After the exam term finished, she was embarking on a month long Contiki
tour around Europe with her best friend from Canada.

I wasn’t ready to head back to Australia yet, having planned to travel for about 6 months before I
did. My home university had already approved my semester deferment, although the reasons were
now drastically different. What had started as 6 months to go traveling was now a new born baby. I
decided that I should simply go ahead with my travel plans, but with you, my baby in tow. I also
cut the trip short, deciding to travel for 4 months, rather than the original six. This would give me
more time to find a job when I got back to Australia, something I knew I needed to do to support
you. I knew traveling with you would change my experience, but I preferred a changed experience
to none at all. I greedily read guide books, plotting my trip on a map and calendar.

I learnt that I would be able to get a passport for you, and leave as planned so long as they were
born within a week of the due date. Any later than that, and I would have to push back my travel
plans. Normally overseas births took much longer to process, but when I had started my enquiries, I
had been lucky enough to speak to a kind, grandmotherly type, Jill. She had understood my
predicament, not being able to leave the UK until you had a passport, but having to leave by the
expiry of my student visa. She talked me through exactly what I needed to do to get a passport in
the month long window of opportunity I had, and by the time you were born I had almost all the
documentation I needed. After your birth, I simply had to travel to London with you to a meeting
with her at the Australian High Commission, with all the paperwork that she requested.

In my discussions with Jill, I had voiced my concerns over what to put on the birth certificate for
your father’s name. I wanted to acknowledge Jasper on your birth certificate, but was scared that
this would create problems for me later in your life, needing his signature on things. I also worried
what to do about the fact I didn’t know his last name. Jill counseled me through my problems,
advising me to list your father as Jasper X on your birth certificate, assuring me that this wouldn’t
cause me problems later in your life.

Vere and I had made plans to spend a week in Paris before she started her tour, but because I
couldn’t commit to a date, I booked everything as fully flexible, and checked the hotel cancellation
policies very carefully. I realised that traveling with a baby was going to be drastically different to
the hostelling I had originally planned, but didn’t regret that. Until I got into Eastern Europe,
hostels were so full of drunk Australians that I preferred not to stay in them anyway.
I continued to cook for Vere and Ad, on the proviso that they did all the shopping. I was simply not up to the bus ride home with groceries any more.

Ad and Vere took their exams as normal, but both had gotten dispensations to take an exam late if I went into labour. Both of their exams finished a week before my due date, so I really hoped that they wouldn’t have to use their special allowances. The university continued to amaze me at how understanding and accommodating it was being to my situation, and I really didn’t want to push my luck.

Both had finished their exams, and my due date had come and gone. I was extremely uncomfortable now, unable to find any position that was easy to sleep in. The extra weight of you in my womb was pulling at my back, causing me extreme pain as it exacerbated an existing injury. Vere had pulled a third bed frame into my bedroom, and either she or Ad slept in the room with me, occasionally waking my up to massage my back or to gently place a wheat heat pack on it.

Three days after my due date, I woke up feeling tense. I couldn’t explain the feeling so pushed it to the back of my mind, choosing to monitor it before telling Ad and Vere. Four hours later, I had showered and eaten breakfast when I felt the first contraction. Wincing in pain, I rubbed my stomach. I sent a brief text message to Dr Liz telling her that I thought I had just felt my first contraction.

She quickly replied. *Wonderful Lilly*.* Ring me when they are 6 minutes apart. I will send a car to get you.*

Smiling, I slipped my phone back in my pocket and glanced at the bag by the door. I had been packed for weeks. Dr Liz had been incredibly considerate of my situation, and had arranged that either she or another one of the doctors that worked at her practice would pick me up when I went into labour. Knowing my lack of a car, and my wish not to buy too much stuff before I went home, she had contacted one of her previous patients who had a baby that had grown out of their first car seat. She had arranged for me to borrow it, as well as a baby bath and a bassinet while I was in country. I didn’t know what I would have done without her support and encouragement. In almost half of my visits, she had to comfort me, assuring me that I could do this, that I could have my baby.

Not wanting to alarm Ad or Vere, I switched on a movie and timed my contractions. When my contraction reached seven minutes apart, I went in search of my friends. I found them sitting on the balcony.

Sinking gratefully into a chair in the sunshine, I tipped my head back, basking in the unexpected
warmth it was giving off. “My contractions are seven minutes apart. Dr Liz said to ring her when they were six minutes apart. Are you both ready?”

Seeing my friends jump up and start panicking, I realised that I was right in waiting to tell them. My morning had been pleasantly calm, despite the mild discomfort of the contractions. I decided that I was comfortable, and simply closed my eyes, enjoying the sunshine.

Forty-five minutes later, my contraction had increased to once every six minutes, and Vere rang Dr Liz.

“Liz will be here in about fifteen minutes. We should start moving downstairs.” I nodded, as Ad moved to help me get up. Vere disappeared off, reappearing with my bag as well as bags for herself and Ad. “I let Jaimee know that we are off. She says good luck.”

Smiling, I slowly waddled down the stairs. Ad walked beside me, supporting my left arm as I gripped the bannister with my right. The four flights of stairs had become increasingly dangerous for me as my belly expanded, rendering me unable to see my feet.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, I opened the door to see Dr Liz standing there, smiling at me. As she approached, she opened her arms, drawing me into a warm hug.

She turned to Ad and Vere. “Got everything?” Seeing them nod, she helped me into the car, moving the passenger seat completely back to accommodate my bulky form. As we drove, I inhaled, noticing for the first time the lavender and rosemary scent of Dr Liz’s car. Tapping something on one of her air vents, she explained. “The lavender helps me relax after a long day at work, and the rosemary just smells like home. I thought you might appreciate them.”

Smiling, I nodded before replying. “They smell great, Dr Liz.”

As we arrived at the hospital, I was whipped into a wheelchair, and wheeled into the maternity wing as my friends filled out my admission paperwork. I changed into my hospital gown, and was strapped up to the monitors. My friends arrived, sitting by my bedside. Dr Liz and I had discussed that while I didn’t want to use drugs, because of the pre-existing back injury, we would see how I felt during labour. She had advised me of the critical periods, and that I would reach a point of no return, where I could not be administered an epidural or other pain relief medication.

Soon after we arrived, my contractions began to speed up, my cervix dilated to the full ten
centimeters. My contractions had evened out, and Dr Liz told me that I should start to push. With Ad and Vere by my side, holding my hands and encouraging me, I began the most painful thing I had ever experienced. The pain was intense, but I knew that it wouldn’t last long. After what felt like hours, but was probably just minutes, Dr Liz told me that my baby’s head was crowning. I gave a final push, and Dr Liz eased your shoulders out, delivering the small child into the world.

Smiling, Dr Liz told me that my daughter was perfect. She had the ten fingers and ten toes she needed. Vere cut the umbilical cord, and you were passed to me. You were beautiful and perfect.

As I looked into your eyes, I realised that keeping you was the best decision I had ever made.

I was in love.
Y’all know the characters that aren’t mine. I’m just playing with them for a while....

My darling daughter, before I was released from hospital, Dr Liz told me that my birth was almost textbook perfect. While I had been in pain, I had managed to have a drug free birth, like I’d wanted. Because of my small stature, there had been fears of tearing or other complications, but nothing had happened.

Looking into your face, I had fallen in love. I knew my life would never be the same, but I didn’t mind. I felt like you had become my sun, and I would orbit around you, constantly aligning myself to your presence.

My baby. My daughter. The most beautiful creature that I had ever seen. Your were perfect, and mine. Not knowing what sex you were, I hadn’t given a lot of thought to your name. Yet, when I looked into your tiny, huge eyes, I thought of the only name for you, the name that seemed perfect to me.

“Welcome to the world, little Isadora. You were a surprise, but you are loved very very much.” I lightly ran my finger down your check, marveling at the softness of the skin. Running my finger carefully under yours, you grabbed, holding on tightly. I had never realised just how strong babies were. “Your daddy might not be part of your life, but I am sure he would love you too.” I felt tears run down my cheeks as I thought of Jasper. Seeing my discomfort, Vere had sat next to me, rubbing silent, soothing circles into my back. Ad wordlessly handed me a tissue, sitting down on my other side. Looking up at them, I smiled though my tears.

“You are one lucky girly, little Isadora. Your aunt Vere and uncle Ad love you very much too,” Vere whispered. “If your mom ever forgets that, you make sure to remind her.”

“Thank you, both of you,” I replied. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“We love you, you silly girl!” Ad exclaimed, laughing. “How could we not stand by you? Especially now you’re such a hot mum.”
Isadora, you fed easily, yet I couldn’t put you down. The nurses were enthralled, and my friends were in love with you. I was in love with you. You are my perfect angel.

Two days later, we were discharged. Dr Liz had arranged her schedule so that she drove us home once more. When we arrived on campus, she pulled me close, hugging me in a way that I didn’t recognise anymore. I had become so used to the baby belly that if felt odd to be hugging someone without it in the way.

“You did really well, I’m so proud of you. I was a little worried, you seemed so disconnected when I first met you, but you have blossomed. You already make a wonderful mother.” I blushed at her compliment, unsure how to respond.

Reaching into the backseat, I lifted you out of the car. Free of the necessity of the car seat, I wanted you as close to me as possible. Carefully, I snuck you into my hug-a-bub. I had practiced putting it on, putting a baby in it, while I was pregnant, using a bag of flour as my baby. At the hospital, free of my belly, I had practiced once more with the nurses watching carefully. I was sure that I had mastered the technique, and found that having you too far from me made me anxious. You looked at me as I settled you in, your eyelids heavy with sleep.

My friends gathered up the rest of the bags, knowing I held the most precious item that had been taken home from the hospital. Hugging Dr Liz goodbye, she reminded me to come and see her for a flow up appointment in a week. We walked slowly up the stairs, to my room.

I was glad we had taken the back stairs, the ones that were never used, not leading anywhere useful. I knew that the people on my floor accepted my pregnancy, but now that you were actually here, I was apprehensive of their response. Reaching my room, Ad unlocked the door and motioned me in. I looked around, noting that the single bed he and Vere had been using had been removed, and in its place, they had set up your bassinet, and a desk had been moved back in with your change table placed on it. Walking over to my bed, I sat down, noticing that the sheets had been changed in my absence.

Looking at you, asleep on my breast, I felt happy and complete. You were perfect, and it was all I could do not to stare at you all the time. Ad and Vere quietly left the room, leaving me to my musings. Over the course of your childhood, I spent a lot of time watching you sleep. You looked like a beautiful little angel, and even without being aware of it, you had me under your control.
There was almost nothing I wouldn’t do for you, and I could deny you nothing within my means.

I slowly fell back into my routine, but it was drastically different to the routine before your birth. I found that in those first few weeks, I would sleep for shorter periods of time, but more overall as I adjusted my life to fit yours. I continued to plan my trip, to cook for Ad and Vere, but you were the centre of my consciousness.

Aware of just how inactive I had been during my pregnancy, I began to take short walks. On these, I would be accompanied by Vere and Ad, and sometimes some of the other girls from the floor would come with us. It was nice to settle back into these easy friendships.

I slowly learnt how to do the most basic of tasks with you around. I wore you in the hug-a-bub most of the time, and it meant that I could cook, read, and do almost every normal activity without having to put you down. I even discovered that I was able to go to the toilet with you in it, which removed a major hurdle for me.

The hardest task I found though, was showering. I was at a loss as to what to do. I couldn’t take you into the shower with me, and I couldn’t leave you unattended in my room. I had Vere watch you a few times while I showered, but knew that for my trip I would have to come up with a better solution.

The solution to my problem came at the most unlikely time. Ten days after you were born, Vere and I made the trip down to London with you to get you a passport. The trip had been finalised two days before we left, and for me it was like a test run to see how I would cope traveling around Europe with you. As I packed our bags, I packed the collapsable baby bath I had been given at the baby shower. As I stared at it, contemplating the best way to pack it, I realised that this was the solution to my problems. If I padded the base with a towel, I would be able to lay you in the bottom of the bath while I showered, and could see you. It would also mean that I would be able to leave you in the changing room, dry half of the shower stall while I showered. The solution seemed so perfectly simple, and I was eager to try it out. Deciding that I had time for a quick shower, I headed off to the bathrooms, with you and the baby bath and an extra towel in tow. Setting you up in the bath, I positioned you out of the spray, with you facing towards me.

The solution was perfect, and I once again felt the weight lift off my shoulders as another obstacle was smoothed from my path.

When Vere, Ad and I arrived in London, we checked into the hotel before wandering out to be tourists. Despite being British, Ad had only been to London once before, and was as excited as Vere and I to explore the famous city. Our first stop was the London Eye, and the spectacular views of the city it offered. With the late arrival of our train, and the slow rotation of the Eye, it was the only attraction we visited that day. That evening, we decided to try to see a musical. We
knew that there was a very real possibility that you would start to cry during the performance, but decided that it was worth the risk. Our fears were ungrounded, and you slept peacefully for most of the performance, waking shortly before the interval needing to be fed before settling back to sleep.

The next morning, we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast before heading to our appointment with Jill. We had scheduled it for eleven am, hoping to avoid the peak times on the tube. Jill cooed over you as she completed the paperwork, gushing at your beauty and perfection. As the proud parent I was, I soaked up the praise. Ad and Vere looked just as proud as I was, and I smiled, knowing they were as enthralled and enamored by you as I was.

Sorting through the piles of paperwork that I needed for your passport, Jill smiled. I had needed to complete twice as many forms for you, because not only was I getting the passport as a rush job, I also did not have people who had known me for over two years in the country, and I was simultaneously applying for citizenship for you. Dr Liz, as a person of respected position in the community, had verified many of my documents.

“It all seems to be here, and in order, Lilly,” Jill said. “I will have this express posted back to you as soon as it’s done.”

Relieved that I would soon be able to travel without overstaying my visa requirements, Ad, Vere and I headed out to sightsee, catching a tour bus to show us the beautiful city. Once again that night, we saw a musical, and once again you were perfectly behaved. In fact, you were an easy baby, well behaved, well adjusted, who didn’t cry too much, and was content almost all the time.

You were perfect, and I was enthralled your entire childhood.

When we returned to university the next day, I suddenly felt confident that I would be able to travel with you, confident that I would be capable of looking after you by myself.

Before your passport arrived, and before we started traveling, the weather was amazingly nice. Surprisingly so. I had grown resigned to the constant rain in England, and the constant grey skies. But, we were blessed with a full week of sunshine when we got back to university.

It made me a little homesick, and I craved the feel of sun on my skin.

So, I spent most of that week sitting on my balcony. We lived on the top floor of our residential block, and there was a balcony running around the building on our floor. Most of the rooms had
access through the sliding doors in the corridors, but for some unknown reason, the access to this
part of the balcony was through a door in one of the empty bedrooms. Because of the layout of the
kitchens and bathrooms on this floor, the door was the only access to this part of the balcony.
Every other door allowed you to walk almost entirely around the building. The limited access gave
me a sense of security I would never have had otherwise.

Over the week of sun, I spent so much time on the balcony with you. Vere and Ad would often join
me, and we would sit silently, watching you sleep, or talk quietly.

When your passport arrived twelve days after we returned from London, I rejoiced, glad to know
that I would be able to travel back to Paris with Vere before we started our respective trips.

I went to see Dr Liz one final time, and was saddened to think that she would not be able to see you
grow. She had become such a steady rock for me. We had discussed your immunisation schedule,
and agreed that I should follow the Australian course of immunisation. I was going to be traveling
when you were due to have both your two month and four month immunisations, and Dr Liz had
kindly arranged for me to have them done by friends of hers that worked in Krakow and Ottawa.
She checked you over, and I felt a surge of love and pride towards you. As I turned to leave,
hugging Dr Liz goodbye, she handed me a small card. It looked like a business card, but as I
flipped it over, I saw that she had written her personal contact details on the back

“Please keep in touch, Lilly. I have grown very fond of you over the last few months, and Isadora is
delightful. I would love to see her grow, and to hear what you are up to. I don’t think that this is
going to dim your future at all. You are destined for a wonderful life, I’m sure of it.”

Tearing up, I nodded, promising that I would add her to my Isadora update list.

The next day, we were having a final farewell party. While most of the people on the floor had
already finished their exams, many had stayed until the end of the term. The day was unusually
sunny, a perfect day for a barbeque on the lawns. As we settled down, I looked around. I had
invited many of my friends from my classes. Isadora, you slept obliviously in the bassinet as my
friends and floor mates fusssed over you, exclaiming at your perfection and beauty. The party lasted
well into the night, with the drinks conversation and laughter flowing freely. Around midnight, it
started to drizzle, and we moved upstairs, many congregating in the communal kitchens to continue
the celebrations. I headed to bed, feeling more content than I had for a long time.

The next three days were a blur of activity as I continued to pack my stuff up. Knowing that you
would be rapidly growing as I travelled, I packed up three care packages boxes, entrusting them
into Ad’s care. I was planning to travel through Europe for three months before heading to Canada
for another month. Ad and I had prearrange locations that he would send me these care packages,
the only definite stops on my itinerary. While I had planned where I wanted to go, much of my
accommodation was unbooked, allowing me to make last minute changes as we travelled. The rest of my stuff, I shipped back to Australia.

The day that Vere and I flew to Paris, we moved the furniture back into the correct places, donated bedding to the charity shop and generally made sure that our rooms were in a better condition than when we found them. We both wanted our full bond back, and planned to do everything we could to ensure its swift return. Entrusting Ad with the return of the borrowed baby gear, we set off for the train station, heading to the airport to begin our adventures.

Chapter End Notes

I know that I seem inconsistent with my spelling of mum and mom. But, this reflects the different backgrounds of my characters. Ad and Lilly are English and Australian, so will use mum, while my north American characters will use mom. Partly because these are the spellings used in each of their native accents, and partly because whenever I speak to north Americans, they do actually pronounce a ‘o’ where I pronounce a ‘u.’

Australian citizenship and passports for children born overseas actually take several months to process. And they are issued by different agencies, so they cannot be done simultaneously. Also, both parents of the birth certificate must give consent when a child’s passport is issued (except in exceptional circumstances). But, for this story to work, I needed them to both be done in less than a month, and wanted Jasper on the birth certificate, so I waved my ‘it’s a story’ wand, to make it work.
My darling girl, I cannot pretend that traveling around with you was easy. But, by the same token, it wasn’t hard. You were an easy baby, so I was able to travel relatively easily with you. You didn’t overly like flying, but that is unsurprising. Flights were the main reason that I carried a bottle and some premixed formula, to allow you something to help equalise the pressure.

Over the course of my travels, I made several important decisions. The first was that I needed to finish my degrees, and get honours in at least one of them. The second was that I needed to get a job when I got home. The third was that I wanted to get my PhD. And the final decision was that I wanted to get my PhD in either America or Canada. This would most likely mean a permanent move to North America, so I would need to set up a college fund for your education.

We travelled slowly, staying at least three nights in any one place we visited. We took a month to get from Paris to Krakow, to meet up with Dr Liz’s friend so you could get your two month immunisations. Along the way we had visited Mont St Michel, Munich, Berlin, Warsaw, Gdansk and the seaside town to Leba. I was entranced, captivated with so many of the places we visited. The majesty of Mont St Michel took my breath away while the stark beauty of the slowly moving sand dunes of the Baltic Sea at Leba were unlike anything I had ever seen. As we moved, I developed a routine for each new place. If we had accommodation booked, we would go directly there from the train station, otherwise we would find the visitors information centre, and get them to book us accommodation. We stayed in single rooms in youth hostels, in budget hotels, in pensions, which were kind of like European B&Bs, in spare rooms old cute old ladies whose children had long since moved on, away from home, and we camped. After finding my accommodation, I would set about finding the nearest supermarket, or bakery, or fruit shop. And then, we would set of for our adventures in the new place.

Whenever we stayed with the little old ladies, they were amazed by you, and would spend hours in the evenings fussing over you in foreign languages, in French and Polish, and as we moved further up the coastline, in Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Russian. You were so enthralling that they would insist that I let them care for you, shooing me off to shower, to nap, to read while they sat with you. There seemed to be a Europe-wide decision that I was too skinny, that I need to be fattened up, and they all fed me magnificently, and unexpectedly. Many of these old ladies loved you so much they refused to let me pay for the accommodation or the food. To thank them for their hospitality, I bought small gifts for them. I have no idea if this offended them or not, but I felt guilty about staying in their houses without paying them in some way.
In every town, where possible, I would join a walking tour, and see the sights of the city that way. I had discovered that thanks to my pregnancy, I was very out of shape, and was exhausted by the end of every tour I took before Warsaw. In Warsaw, I began to notice that I was once more able to walk for most of the day without major problems.

Leaving Krakow, we travelled further north in Europe, into the Baltic States. In Western Europe, we had travelled by brand new, fast trains. As we moved into Poland, the trains became older and slower, reflecting the division that still existed between the countries on each side of the iron curtain. Crossing from Poland to Lithuania, the trains became busses, many older than I was. The after effects of the communist regime was still clearly visible in the Baltic states, and I was amazed to see the division between affluence and poverty that existed within many of these countries, especially outside of the big cities.

On the long train and bus journeys we took, you would sleep most of the way, but rarely slept for the entire voyage. While you slept, I would read or play sudoku to keep myself occupied. When you woke up, I had to keep you occupied. Somewhere between Berlin and Warsaw, I discovered that while you were often cranky and difficult when you woke up, reading aloud to you would help you settle. I assume it was because of hearing my voice, but it became a habit. When you woke on these long trips, I would make sure you were fed and changed, and then read to you. In Western Europe, and to a lesser extent in Poland, I was able to get my hands on English language books relatively easily. As we moved further north, it became harder and harder to find anything other than classic literature in English. As a result, I purchased many of the works of Shakespeare during our time in the Baltic states. You took to these immediately, and I would read them to you at night, in place of more stereotypical children’s books. The rhythms and cadences of Elizabethan English seemed to relax you, and you would often fall asleep as I read to you.

In Lithuania, I took you to your first beach, and we discovered how cold the Baltic sea could be. In Latvia, I visited castle ruins, walking the hundreds of steps up and down the valleys, and along the river to see them. In Estonia, we visited the island of Saaremaa, and saw the meteorite craters scattered about the island. We visited so many places that are in my photo albums at home. Each of them was magical, and even more so because I got to spend them with you.

I know that I have probably made it sound like traveling with you was easy, simple. I will not lie to you and tell you that it was. Because, truthfully, it was really hard. I had to carry all of my stuff, all of your stuff, a tent and sleeping bag, a laptop, changing bag for you, and most importantly you. In many of the trains I caught, a nice gentleman would take pity on me and lift my bags on and off the luggage racks above our heads. While I had packed as lightly as possible, my hiking pack still weighted over twenty kilos, and with the addition of you, I was unable to lift it higher than onto my shoulders. When we started traveling on busses, the drivers would load my bags into the bus for me, although many seemed confused by a clearly foreign tourist with such a young baby, traveling alone.

Twice, Ad sent us care packages, in prearranged destinations. We received the first of these in Krakow, then one in Riga. I had packed these before leaving university, and had filled them with
practical things - new clothes for you, extra jumpers for me, baby wipes and other products I knew I would be running out of. To my surprise, when I unpacked these boxes, Ad had added things, sending me little gifts for myself, and for you. He packed small stuffed animals, chocolates, a few new tops for me. Things that I loved him for. His kindness was unwavering, and I felt blessed to have met him. And I was amazed that he had managed to find things that would fit in my pack, that I did not have to struggle to carry with me.

In return, I sent boxes to Ad, things that you had outgrown, souvenirs I had picked up in our travels, little things that helped in lightening my load. He was kindly looking after much of my stuff, allowing me a place to use as a base before I returned to Australia.

The third month, I returned to England and spent a week with Ad and his boyfriend. You were fussed over, spoilt during that time. I repacked my bags, anticipating the colder weather I was traveling to in Canada. I also packed all of the rest of my stuff up, boxing it to be posted back to Australia.

Knowing that I had a month until I was due home, and still unsure of my parents response to you, I rang my best friend at home, Fern. She had met my parents twice, and knew that my relationship with them was uneasy. They had tried to impose their religious beliefs on me, and had failed. I simply did not believe what they did. I had found their insistence that I follow their doctrine stifling, and had spent many of my high school and college years at her house. Our age difference had never been an issue, despite the fact she was almost three years older than me.

I had yet to tell my parents when I was returning to Australia. I had simply told them some time in October or November, when my money ran out or I got tired. I had talked to Fern on and off during my pregnancy and travels, but hadn’t told her about you. I still don’t know why, but I guess it was because I was scared of her reaction, far more scared than I was of my parents reactions. Since turning eighteen, I knew that I was legally an adult, and able to sever all connections with my parents. There was enough bad blood, and little love between us, so severing the ties would not cause me a great deal of distress. But, Fern was my friend, and I loved her. It would hurt to have my connection with her severed, and I dreaded her reacting badly.

But I needed to tell her.

So, I made one of the scariest phone conversations of my life. Figuring out the time difference, I rang Fern, aiming for 8pm on a Tuesday night, knowing that she was usually home at that time.

“Fern, hi!” I tried to sound excited to be talking to her, but I think I failed. No, I know I failed.
“Lilly, honey, what’s wrong?” Fern enquired. My fear must have been more in my voice than I expected.

“Umm… I have something to tell you. Something I should have told you ten months ago, when I first found out. But I didn’t know how, so please don’t hate me… Fern, I have a four month old daughter. Do you have a computer nearby? I have just sent you a couple of pictures. Her name is Isadora, and she is perfect. My entire world.” I was talking faster and faster, a note of hysteria creeping into my voice.

“Lilly, honey, slow down. You have a four month old? Why ever didn’t you tell me? Let me open the pictures…. Oh honey, she is perfect!”

I took several deep breaths, trying to calm myself. Fern came from a much more liberal background than mine, and I had known that she wouldn’t judge me. I also knew that she loved all children, and couldn’t wait to have several of her own. A large brood if possible.

Steeling myself, I replied. “Yes, a four month old. And I don’t know why I didn’t tell you. I haven’t told anyone at home. You are the first. My parents don’t know, and that is part of the reason that I am ringing you.

“They also don’t know when I am coming home. They think I just haven’t decided yet. My ticket is actually booked. I will be arriving into Sydney on October nineteen. I was wondering if you could pick me up? And if I could stay with you guys for a little bit? I know that it is a huge thing to ask, but I don’t want to take Isa home, at least not immediately. I want to talk to my parents before I have to introduce her to them. I don’t want her exposed to their crazy. And I can just see my parents going off their tree at me… Please?” My tone was pleading by the time I had finished talking, and I knew I was on the verge of tears. My voice had started to waver, and I was sure that Fern knew it too.

“Lilly, honey, don’t cry. Of course you can stay with us. Do you have a car seat? A cot? A bath? Actually, what do you have?”

Smiling, I realised that my fears in telling Fern had been unfounded. “Ummm…. No, I don’t have a car seat. I was going to order one and have it shipped to your house, if that is okay? I don’t even know if I will have a car when I get home… I don’t have a cot for her, but she has been sleeping either with me or in a portable bassinet. I have a collapsible bath. I don’t have a pram, but she spends most of her time in my hug-a-bub or in a sling so I don’t need one. Please, don’t rush out and buy anything, I would feel just too guilty staying at your house if you did. We have enough stuff to be comfortable. My university friends were amazing, and they threw me a baby shower, and gave me most of the stuff I need… the one thing I would ask is that you baby proof your house a bit? You don’t need to go overboard yet, she isn’t crawling… but I think she will be soon. So, if
you could put covers in electrical sockets, child locks on doors and draws with poisons or knives... and a gate on your stairs? That would be amazing. I would be sooo much in your debt. Oh, and can I send you some stuff? I need to send most of the baby stuff home, and I don’t want my parents unpacking the boxes.”

“Sure, honey. Do need anything for yourself? Clothes, anything?”

“No, just a bed to sleep in. With sheets and blankets, of course.” I smiled over the phone at my friend. Perhaps my homecoming wouldn’t be as bad as I had expected.

We chatted for another half hour, catching up and reminiscing. Hanging up, I felt lighter, freer than I had in months. I hadn’t realised how much I had been fearing going home.

I was in England for a bit over a week before flying to Canada, and in that time I repacked, sent stuff home to Fern, and travelled up to another round of immunisations with Dr Liz. Seeing you, Isadora, Dr Liz cooed, exclaiming on how big you had gotten, how beautiful you were. She asked how my travels had been, and insisted on taking me out to dinner to catch up. I blushed at her kindness, unable to refuse this woman who had become a mother to me. I was sad to know that soon I would be leaving the country, and had no idea if I would ever return. I told Dr Liz about my conversation with Fern, and Liz consoled me, knowing the stress and fear telling my parents had me under. Once again, as we parted, Liz gave me her contact details, telling me if I was ever this way, to look her up.

“Gorgeous girl, you and Isadora always have a bed at my house if you need it.”

I hugged her farewell, returning the offer. “And, if you ever end up down my way, you have a bed wherever I am.”

We parted, and I made my way back to Ad’s, sad that I was about to leave Dr Liz’s love and support, but excited to be seeing Vere so soon.

Once again, the flight was better than I had expected, and the flight attendants clucked over you, making sure I was comfortable and had everything I could possibly need. They helped me with my bags, and made sure I had assistance at the baggage carousel. Once again you had charmed and enthralled everyone around you.

As I passed through security and immigration, I was blown away to see Vere waiting for me, holding a huge sign welcoming us both to the country. Standing with her were two people I assumed were her parents, and a young man who I recognised from photos as her boyfriend. They
greeted me warmly, taking the luggage trolley from my grip, informing me that they had hired a car seat for you, for the duration of our stay.

I felt loved, amazed by the generosity of these people I had never met. I spent close to three weeks with Vere in Ottawa. Her parents fell in love with you, and offered to look after several nights, giving me a chance to go out with Vere and her boyfriend, to meet some of her friends. I felt apprehensive, anxious each time I left you. In your short life, the only time we had been separated was short periods of time when you were less than a month old, and I showered. We had spent every moment after than together. Vere was understanding, having seen my bond with you from the beginning. The first time we went out, you and I were separated for two hours as Vere and I had dinner. The next time, I felt comfortable enough to see a movie, and the final time that Vere’s parents minded you, I spent almost six hours away from you, hanging out with Vere’s friends.

In the middle of my time in Canada, I had taken a week to visit a couple of universities that were on my list of places to do postgrad study at. University of Toronto, McGill and Cornell. Each had its own charm, strengths and weaknesses. I was glad that I got a chance to visit each of the institutions, able to get a feel before I considered enrolling.

After my trips to the universities, I had a bit over a week left in Ottawa with Vere. I loved the feel of the city, and was saddened that the universities there didn’t offer what I was looking for. I would have liked to be able to consider a place where I knew people, had a bit of a support network already formed.

As her family took me to the airport, farewelling me and you, I grew more anxious, knowing I was about to return home, about to return to the same city as my parents. I knew there was no way I could avoid telling them once I got home, and I was worried about what they would think. My fear must have shown, as the flight attendants seemed even more attentive this flight, occasionally taking you for a few minutes, offering me alcohol to calm my nerves. I declined the drinks, and tried to focus on you as I closed the distance between myself and my parents.

Stepping out of the arrivals gate at Sydney airport, I was greeted by Fern, her smile huge, and her arms open offering me a hug.

“I knew you’d be over thinking this. I’m gonna get you home, your room is all set up, and then you take your time telling your parents. You have a room at our place as long as you need it.”

Smiling with gratitude, I took her hand, and we walked out of the airport, ready to face the next part of my life. Of our lives.
Fern had installed the car seat in her car, and sitting in it was a brand new stuffed animal. Mr Lefant. You still have him. He sits on your bookshelf now. He was the first of many gifts that Fern showered on you over the next few months. On the drive home, you fell asleep clutching him as Fern and I talked quietly.

She told me that she and her boyfriend had moved out of their parent’s houses six months earlier, when her grandfather had died. He was the last grandparent she had, the rest having passed away before she was born. Being the only child of only children, each grandparent had left her substantial sums of money as inheritance. The inheritance from the first three grandparents had been invested, and when combined with the inheritance from her grandfather, she had a very large sum of money to play with. She had bought a house about four months earlier, and told me that with her current salary, she would have the mortgage payed off in less than ten years. As it was, her boyfriend Tabb was contributing to the mortgage, and it looked like everything would be paid in less than five years.

“So, honey, don’t worry about rent or anything. You can stay with us as long as you need to.”

Fern was right when she said that the bedroom was all set up for us. She had contacted Ad and Vere, and had discussed what I did and didn’t have. Over the course of their conversations, my three best friends slowly, quietly formed a friendship, something I would not find out about for many years. Ad had told Fern that everything I had was collapsible, light, designed for travel not constant use.

So, Fern had decked out a large, ensuite bedroom in her house for us. Not only had she provided me with a queen sized bed, she had invested in brand new furniture for you - a change table, bath, cot, high chair and a beautiful mobile. The room was covered with toys, as well as having a wall that was covered in bookshelves. Several of the shelves had already been filled, with a collection of children’s books and the fantasy fiction I preferred.

I was blown away by her generosity, and a little humbled. “Fern, you didn’t need to do all this. I mean, I may only be here for a week. You must have spent so much money. It’s beautiful but, it’s too much.”
Laughing, Fern refused to accept my protests.

“Honey, even if you do go back to your parents, you’re gonna need time away from them. We both know that your relationship with them is tense at the best of times. I am offering you that place. Please, just accept it.”

It took me a week, my darling girl, to gather the courage to visit my parents. I knew that their routine wouldn’t have changed much over my absence, and decided that a Thursday night was my best bet for catching them at home.

Darling girl, I didn’t take you with me that day. I asked Fern to watch you for the evening, rather than take you with me. I wanted to talk to them first, to explain my situation. I rang them about half an hour before I planned to go over there, telling them that I had caught an earlier plane and was on my way home from the airport.

Arriving at the house I had grown up with, I was armed with a photo album of my pregnancy, of your life, of our travels. An album that I wanted to give to them. Not that I got the chance.

My mother was confused when I didn’t have any bags with me. Sitting her and my father down, I began to tell them the story of you.

“Mum, Dad, I have something to tell you. Something amazing, special, lovely. I want you both to keep an open mind and open hearts about what I am going to tell you.”

Taking in the looks of confusion on their faces, I opened the photo album, turning it so they could see the photos. Passing them the album, I continued. “While I was away, I fell pregnant. I have a beautiful baby girl, Isadora. You have a beautiful grand daughter. She is five months old. I have been back in the country for a week, trying to gather up the courage to tell you about her. I have been so scared of your response, and I really need you to accept her, to accept my actions. She is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I cannot imagine my life without her.”

My mother had been looking, unseeing at the photo album. Closing the book, she passed it back to me. Exchanging a look with my father, she spoke. “Lillian Delphine Haig, we raised you better than that. Losing your virtue, having a child out of wedlock. A baby needs a mother and a father. You are too young to raise this child, ill equipped. Where is the child’s father? No, don’t answer that, it’s clear that he is not around. Otherwise he would be here, asking for our forgiveness and your hand in marriage to give that child a proper life, with a proper family.”
She kept referring to you as ‘that child.’ My mother refused to recognise you as my daughter or her granddaughter. It hurt, but was no different to what I had been expecting. What my father said, however, floored me.

“Lillian, we expect you to give that child a proper household, a proper childhood and family. We will get you the papers, and we expect you to give that child up for adoption. Our church has links with a wonderful agency, your mother and I have counseled many young women in your situation about the benefits of adoption. I will have the papers for you in the morning.” Standing up, he picked up his keys. “We will go and pick the child up now, and drop her off at the adoption agency. Where is she?”

“NO!” I yelled, unsure if I was really hearing what I thought I was. “I am not giving my child up for adoption. I love her, and she loves me. I know the problems that adopted children face, and she will be better off with me, as a single parent that adopted out, with two parents that you deem more suitable for her.”

Taking a deep breath, I continued. “If you can’t accept Isadora as your grandchild, then I disown you, divorce you, sever all my ties with you. I’m an adult, and no longer need your consent for anything. If you can’t accept her, and us, then I’m better off without you.”

By the time I had finished speaking, my voice had shifted from its outraged yell to carefully modulated tones. I spoke carefully, needing my parents to see that this was not an emotional outburst, it was a carefully considered decision.

My mother was the first to react to my outburst. “Fine. You disown us. You have three days to take all your possessions and leave this house. Your father and I will be away for the weekend, hosting a camp helping disadvantaged children to find God. We expect you to have cleaned out your room by the time we get back on Sunday night. You may not take the car you were driving before you left, that is your fathers. You have made your bed, and now you must lie in it. Leave the keys on the bench.” Standing up, she opened the door, indicating that I should leave.

I walked out of the house, in a daze. I had always realised that it was a possibility that they would disown me, but had held hopes that this wouldn’t actually happen.

But you know what hurt the most, darling girl? They hadn’t even wanted to meet you. You were an accident, to be sure, but you were never a mistake to me. But that is all they saw you as. A mistake that they needed to fix. They never even met you.

I walked aimlessly, not seeing where I was going, slowly planning my next move. I didn’t come
out of my daze until an hour and a half later, when I arrived back on Fern’s doorstep. I blinked, surprised that I had walked the three suburbs between her house and my parents house without even knowing it.

As I walked back into the house, I saw your face, my darling girl, and knew that I had made the right decision. I knew my life was going to be difficult for the next few years, but also knew that there was no way I would trade you for an easier life.

For the first four months we were in Australia, we lived with Fern and Tabb. I felt guilty living there rent free, but Fern insisted that it was fine. She knew that I had to save as much money as I could before I started school again. I had three semesters left until my graduation, and I wanted to finish my education.

Fern and Tabb helped me move, and it was done in two of the allotted days. I felt no sense of loss when I placed my house key on the table, no grief for severing ties with my parents.

Knowing the key was symbolic, I set about severing legal ties with my parents. Before leaving on my exchange year, we had a solicitor draw up a will and power of attorney documents for me. Knowing that my parents had legal custody over you if anything were to happen to me frightened me. So, I had the documents redrawn. I listed three guardians for you, with you being my sole benefactor unless I was to have other children, when my assets would be split. If you were old enough to make the decision, you were to decide who would be your guardian if anything should happen to me. Otherwise, the geographically closest of your guardians would become your legal guardian. I discussed with Vere, Ad and Fern, and gave each of them power of attorney. I had the documents written in a way that ensured only one of them would have to make the decisions, if needed.

I also had the solicitor draw up paperwork that explicitly stated that you were my next of kin, and that my parents had no family rights. They could not visit me in hospital, but listed Fern, Ad and Vere as members of my family, formally adopting them as family. I was sound of mind, and these documents removed any legal rights my parents had in relation to me. Or to you. They could not contest my will, they could not act as your guardian or make decisions for me under power of attorney rules, they could not make medical decisions if ever needed. I may as well have been a stranger, the rights that they had over me. DNA no longer meant anything. I know that they received copies of the papers, Fern hand delivered them herself. They made no attempt to contact me, to get me to try to change my mind.

Having completely severed legal ties with my parents, I realised that I had almost no emotional ties to sever. When they had refused to meet you, had insisted that you be put up for adoption, I think they had been severed without my knowledge.
A fortnight after arriving home, I started applying for jobs. I applied for anything that was available, although many of them were not logistically possible unless I found a childcare place or babysitter for you. And if I did, I would probably spend as much on your care as I would earn in a day.

So, when I got a phone call in the middle of November for a job interview, I couldn’t believe my luck. The position was part time, flexible, and had the option of working from home. Trying not to jinx myself, I went to the job interview, and met with the lovely lady who was to become my boss.

The job interview was unlike any I had ever experienced. I spent more time discussing my personal life than I did answering questions about my suitability for the job. I felt like I was out to coffee with an old friend, someone who I hadn’t seen in many years, not in an interview. My darling girl, when you enter the job market, you will find that usually, interviews are stressful, frightening experiences. Abaigael, my soon to be boss, was amazing. She listened to my situation, and by the end of our interview, she had offered me a job. She understood my commitment to both you and my studies, and was prepared to be flexible in my workload. She hired me as a research assistant.

Explaining that I would be paid fixed weekly rate, it was up to me to budget my time. At the beginning of each week, I would have to let her know if it was a light, medium or heavy week, and my tasks (and pay) would be adjusted accordingly. She explained that most university students took on a heavy workload during holidays, a medium workload during terms, and a light load during exams or when they had major assignments due. I agreed that this would probably be the same for me. She was happy for me to work from home, but I had to ensure that I had internet access. I was expected to reply to emails within twenty-four hours during the week, or within forty-eight hours during weekends. If I was going to be out of contact for longer periods of time than this, I needed to provide seventy-two hours notice. I would have the access codes to log onto the work systems remotely, but if I worked from home was responsible for paying for my own internet access.

The conditions she proposed seemed more than adequate for me, and I was especially pleased that I would be able to work from home. We agreed that while I got a feel for the work, I would complete a medium load for the first two weeks. If I felt that I was able to complete a heavy workload after that, I would be able to specify that. The only other commitment that the job had was a monthly, compulsory staff meeting. Without a doctor certificate or prior notification, these were non negotiable.

Over the four months before I started university again, I worked for Abaigael, discovering that the ‘heavy’ workload was light enough that I was able to complete it after I put you to bed in the evenings, before I went to bed myself. Abaigael was more than happy with the standard of work I completed, and advised me that if I was interested, there was a fourth, higher workload. The pay was, of course, higher, but she rarely offered it in initial interviews until she had a feel for the quality of work an individual produced. The standard of work I was producing was suitably high for me to be eligible for the ‘very heavy’ workload. I tried the ‘very heavy’ workload, and discovered that it was not much more taxing than the heavy workload, and while I was on holidays, well worth the extra money. I knew that when I returned to university, I would have to drop back to
My birthday and Christmas passed as quiet affairs in the first year of your life. I had never really been comfortable being the centre of attention and celebrating my own birthday, preferring to celebrate on other people’s behalf. As for Christmas, my personal religious beliefs surrounding the holiday had always been overshadowed by my parents beliefs, and for the first time in my life I felt that I could spend the day as I saw fit. I continued the present tradition, giving you small gifts, and opening the gifts Ad, Vere, Vere’s parents, Dr Liz, Fern and Tabb had gotten you. I received a few small things myself, but my concern for the holiday was primarily you. It stayed that way until you were six, and something switched in your brain. You realised that there was no Santa Claus, and that it was me giving you the gifts each year. After than, you insisted on buying me a gift each year, and each year I have been touched by the thought you put into these gifts.

But, I digress.

Once I started uni again, living with Fern and Tabb without a car became unfeasible. I would have to spend over two hours on a bus each day, and I was unable to spare that amount of time for travel. Instead, we moved into a tiny one bedroom apartment a twenty minute walk from campus. The bus services from the apartment were more frequent, and got us onto campus in about fifteen minutes. When we moved from Fern’s, she had insisted that we take the furniture she had bought for you before we arrived in Australia. I already owned a bed, so knew that I only needed to invest in a couch, a table and chairs to get by. Living with you was more important to me than living in decadence or luxury.

The apartment we lived in until your fifth birthday was small, but functional. It came with a fridge and freezer, which was one of its biggest selling points. We shared a bedroom, with me in the double bed and you in the cot, then, when you were about eighteen months old, you upgraded to a single bed. The living area and kitchen were in the other room, and held a couch and dining table and chairs. The only other room was the bathroom, which was small and lacked a bath, but had a space for a washing machine. Over the first month we lived in the apartment, I scoured the paper for washing machines. The first few weeks, they were either too big for the space, or already sold when I rang. On the fourth week I looked, though, I got lucky. The machine was young enough that it was still in warranty, a front loader that was more environmentally friendly than top loaders, small enough for the space, within my price range, and still available. I bought it immediately, and Tabb kindly helped me move it up the steps and into the bathroom, even connecting it up for me.

Storage in the apartment was limited, so I had portable clothes racks and piles of books all over it. I had considered making book shelves, but decided that it was safer to have the books in piles. They were far lighter if you managed to pull them over onto yourself. Which you did frequently.

I thought about buying a television several times while we lived in our little apartment, but I never did. I found that I didn’t miss the inane programming, preferring to loose myself in the world of
books. If I did want to watch something, I would hire a DVD or find it on the internet, watching on my laptop.

My darling girl, we lived in a bubble over the next few years, but it was a happy bubble that we were both content with.
My darling girl, over the next eighteen months I worked harder than I think I ever have. I think that I worked harder than during my PhD, even. But, during my PhD, I did not have a child who was beginning to walk, beginning to speak, needing toilet training. By the time I started my PhD, you were enrolled in school, starting your own education.

For the first semester of classes, I had fifteen contact hours per week, in the second semester I had six contact hours, and in the third semester I had just three contact hours. The university childcare centre put you on their waiting list, but I only wanted to enroll you for the hours I was in class. By the time I started classes, I had a small amount of savings behind me, and was working regular hours for Abaigael. I decided that the best course of action was to hire a uni student to watch you while I was in class. For the first semester, I found two girls, and their combined wages consumed a fair chunk of my earnings. For the second and third semesters, I only needed one of the girls, and my wages greatly outweighed what I was paying her.

In my second semester back at uni, the June after we arrived back in Australia, I started my honours year. Despite the increased load my honours created, I found that I was still able to maintain a heavy workload for Abaigael. She continued to be pleased with my work, and I began to be able to save. I had two savings accounts. One was your college fund, and the other was mine. For the eighteen months that I completed my undergraduate study, we lived very frugally. I happily ate vegetarian most nights, and had carefully checked with your doctor that I was giving you all the required nutrients if I did so. We ate either chicken or fish once a week, but never red meat. I had still not managed to get over my aversion to the blood in red meat, and hadn’t cooked any since the ill fated roast that I had started and Ad finished.

I found a local group of young mothers who walked several days a week. Each walk was a big gossip session, and I slowly learnt each woman’s story, and them mine. At the end of each walk, we would have a picnic, outside if it was nice weather, or at one of their houses if it was not. I never offered our apartment, knowing it was too small for the twelve to eighteen people (including babies) that went on each walk. The mothers were amazed to see you in the hug-a-bub and, as you got older, the sling. I never bought a pram, preferring to have to on my body if I walked with you. Several vowed to try them out with their next children, and I smiled. I explained how invaluable the hug-a-bub had been as I travelled around Europe, and they were all converts. Many of us have kept in touch over the years, and I smile each time one of them sends me a photo of their new children in slings or hug-a-bubs.

My studies progressed easily, and once I finished my undergraduate coursework, I began my combined honours program in Psychology and Gender Studies. My honours findings were based on such small samples that the results are easily questionable, but I looked at the bonding practices between mothers who use traditional (or modern adaptations of traditional) baby carrying devices.
such as slings, and modern devices such as prams. I found that babies carried close to the mothers' bodies developed secure attachments more often than babies carried in prams. Linking this with my gender studies major, I discussed the cultural implications of the technologies of motherhood, like prams, arguing that like many other 'time saving' devices of the modern world, they failed to ease the load of women, who remained the primary custodians of childrearing.

I could tell you more about my studies during that time, but honestly, it isn't that interesting. I can be summed up in a single sentence. I attended classes, I did my homework, and I graduated. I knew that I needed my education, that I was severely limiting my options if I dropped out of university. But you were my main focus, the main concern during that time.

Your second birthday was the day after I graduated with my BSc (Psych) (Hons) / BA (Hons), earning first class honours for both degrees. We celebrated both milestones with Fern and Tabb. Two years earlier, it would have been my parents sitting in the auditorium, golf clapping as I received my degrees. Now, it was two of my best friends who cheered for me as I walked across the small stage. With the completion of my undergraduate studies, I was one step closer to achieving the goals I had set up for myself the day I disowned my parents.

With no studies to worry about, I returned to a 'very heavy' workload for Abaigael. I continued to walk with the mothers group, and you would play with the other kids at the ends of our walks. Feeling more slothish now I didn’t walk to and from university with any regularity, I thought I would get back into dancing and swimming.

One of the girls that had been watching you while I attended classes agreed to watch you one night a week, allowing me to go to my dance classes. I hadn’t been to one since before I started my exchange year. Three years ago, by that stage. I doubted I would remember much, assuming that I would have to start from scratch once more. My body surprised me though.

As I danced, my body remembered what I was meant to do, where to step, when to turn and when to stop. My body dipped and dropped, twirled and stepped in ways that my mind was unable to remember. I knew that the next day I would be paying for it, but was finding it exhilarating to be back. To remember anything at all. The class structure had changed since my last lesson, and I was happy to watch the final part of the lesson, the intermediate advanced class. The teacher, remembering me from before my exchange, and having watched me for the lesson and freestyle sessions, suggested that I try the IA - intermediate advanced class. Looking around the room, I saw many faces that I remembered, people who had been nice and friendly to me years before.

As I rotated around the class, my dance partners asked what I had been up to, where I had been for the last few years. I explained about my exchange, about finishing my degree, before explaining about you.
As I mentioned you, the lesson came to a stand still, as Zarita, the teacher squealed and rushed to my side.

My darling girl, I must explain that most of the people in the IA class, and the teacher, had known me before you were born. They knew me before I was even an adult, and knew how young I was. My news was shocking to them, and they all wanted to hear my story.

So I gave them the cliff notes version, the short edition of your conception, birth and my life with you.

Zarita hugged me, insisting that I bring you to the next class with me, so everyone could meet you. I was unsure how that would go, but complied to their wishes. The next week when I turned up to class, you were in my arms. I didn’t dance much during the lessons that night, but caught up with many of the people I had known years earlier. You captivated them all, smiling and babbling away. As we sat and talked, I learnt that Zarita had recently given birth herself, to a baby girl. I was stunned to learn that she had ever been pregnant. She was as tiny as I remembered her, and it seemed to me like a baby could never have fitted anywhere on her frame.

After that, you would occasionally come with me to the dance classes, when I was unable to get a sitter for you. You would sit quietly, drawing, playing with your stuffed animals, or being fawned over by the women in the class, while I participated in the classes.

Your two year old self was startlingly beautiful, my darling girl. You were like a Botticelli angel or a Michelangelo cherub at two. Your blue eyes were piercing, startling in their colour. They peeked out from some of the longest lashes I had ever seen. Both the eye colour and lashes were a gift from your father. You will never need mascara, my beautiful girl. You have the lashes that every make up artist wants to achieve. You had beed gifted with my skin and hair colouring - the dark hair verging on black inside and almost red in sunlight, the olive skin. But, unlike me, your hair was, is thick, and cascaded down your back in the gentle waves I remember from your father. I have never been able to cut your hair, cherishing it as a tangible symbol of Jasper. You were beautiful, as you are now.

As well as my dance classes, I began swimming laps again. I tried to get to the pool three times a week, although this didn’t always happen. One day a week I had enrolled you in swimming lessons, and I would spend the hour long lesson swimming laps. The other visits, I took advantage of the pool’s child minding system. So long as the maximum ratios were not reached, children could be left in the daycare area, on presentation of a valid entry card for the day. The service was blessedly free, and I was extremely grateful for small helping hands. I often felt slightly guilty leaving you there, but knew that it was always for less than an hour. The swimming, combined with the dancing and walking with the other mums, I felt my body slowly begin to settle back into its pre baby state, and I began to feel less slothish.
In fact, I began to feel more alive than I had for most of the last eighteen months of my degree. I knew that I had to work to support you, to further my education, but I felt blissfully free in those first few months after I graduated.

I continued to work for Abaigael, and found that I was thoroughly enjoying the work I did for her.

The year after I finished my degree was a happy one for both of us. You grew, and learned, and we would play. We would go on the mothers walks, and have picnics with the other mothers and their children. In the evenings, I would complete my work for Abaigael. I would go to my dance classes, and swim. At least once a fortnight, Fern world come round, and she and I would catch up. You were enamored with her, amazed with her bright blue hair and rainbow clothes.

We were happy, my darling, and I loved all my time with you.

Chapter End Notes

Note: the honours findings are made up. While I assume that babies carried close to the mother in slings or similar devices would develop more secure attachments than babies carried primarily in prams, this is something that I came up with to link the two degrees, BA and BSc (Psychology). I have neither studied nor read anything about this precise topic.

In Australia, it is common to take two undergraduate degrees simultaneously. The end result is two degrees, which can have either no honours, honours in one of the subjects, or honours in both of the subjects.
The next two years passed fairly uneventfully, my darling girl. You and I found a routine, and we comfortably followed it. You continued to grow into the most beautiful child I could imagine, and I was happy, finally coming to terms with my divorce from my parents years earlier.

I enrolled you in a two year preschool program when you were three, and suddenly found myself with four hours a day free, Monday to Friday. Unsure what to do with myself, I increased my workload with Abaigael, effectively working a double ‘heavy load.’ The work continued to interest me, and I watched our college funds grow each week. I was also able to treat you more often, although I was careful not to spoil you. With the extra work, I found that we could live a little less frugally, a little more comfortably. We continued to live in the same small apartment, sharing a bedroom, and continued to walk or catch buses everywhere. Living as close as we did to your preschool, to my university, and working at home, I found I rarely needed a car for any reason. On the odd occasions that I did need a car, Fern was happy to lend me one.

As I had done every night of your life, I continued to tell you your faerie tale before you went to bed. Often, you would sleepily say the words with me. We had both memorised the words of the story, were both calmed by its familiar cadences and information. I knew that it would not be long until you started asking me for more information about your father, but for the time being you were content with the faerie tale.

You loved preschool. You fit in well with your peers, making friends more easily than I ever had. The teachers assured me that you were a joy in the classroom, easy to teach and eager to learn and participate. I was happy that you fitted in so well, that you were becoming such a good student. Even though my little student was only three or four years old.

Each day, we would walk the two kilometres to your preschool. You would walk proudly in front of me, wearing the little backpack that contained your recess, lunch and a jumper. Proud to be like the big kids from the mothers walking group, the kids who had already started primary school. You couldn’t wait to get to preschool in the mornings, and I had to drag you away each afternoon.

In your second year of preschool, I started applying for graduate schools in North America. I was concerned about uprooting you from your home, but knew that the education I would receive in these universities I was applying to was far better than the education I would receive in Australia. I was continuing my study of gender sexuality and culture, and looking at writing my PhD thesis of something about religion and teen pregnancy. My ideas were not fully formed, and I didn’t expect them to become fully formulated until after I was accepted into an institution, after I began to discuss my topic with my supervisor.

Looking at the research focus of the universities that interested me, I immediately ruled out
McGill. While it was very well respected, the gender studies focus went in a different direction to my interests. Toronto had many positive aspects, but I was not sure that I wanted to live in such a large city. Cornell, in Ithaca, New York, offered everything I wanted. It was in a small enough city that I knew I could live there comfortably, had a well respected gender studies department that meshed with my own interests, and had a decent school system.

The final consideration became the deciding factor. I wanted you to get the best education possible, and without good schools I knew that this wasn’t possible.

I began contacting members of the faculty, assessing each for their compatibility and knowledge about my proposed project area, and their availability as a supervisor. Finally finding someone who I thought I would be able to work with, I applied. The application process was long, especially as I was requesting an unusual enrollment.

Coming from Australia, I knew that under my existing degree and educational system, I was able to go directly from my undergraduate degree into a three year PhD program. However, in the States, the normal pathway was an undergraduate degree, then a two years masters program before the three year PhD program. I really didn’t want to waste the time on a masters program when I knew that I was already qualified to go directly into a PhD program. So, I had appealed to the university to grant me special enrollment, directly into the PhD program.

Three weeks before you finished preschool, I found out that not only had they granted me permission to enroll in the PhD program directly, they had accepted my enrollment, and were granting me a full scholarship and bursary program. I was due to start in 7 months, half way through your kindergarten year.

Knowing the amount of planning required to uproot both of us, I set about beginning the paperwork. Your passport was due to expire three weeks after we arrived in the US, so I had it renewed. My own passport had expired, so I had to have a new one issued. With both passports valid for at least the length of my PhD, and my university acceptance letters in my hands, I set about filling out the paperwork for our American visas. Why America makes the process so difficult is utterly beyond me, but then again, I’m not an immigration expert or anything.

Darling, you started kindergarten in Australia. Because the academic years in the Southern and Northern hemispheres don’t line up, I had a choice to make. When we arrived in Ithaca, I could either enroll you to complete a full year of kindergarten, or to start you in the first grade. I agonised over this decision. Although, darling girl, once you started school there, I was unsure why the decision had been so hard, when it was obviously the right one.

I enrolled you in first grade.
This was the first time that you skipped a grade, although because you had completed a semester of kindergarten, I’m still not sure if it counts as skipping.

When you started kindergarten, you moved from the half days of preschool to full days of real school. You were so proud to be going to real school, to be carrying more in your little backpack than food. You were thrilled when we got your first school books, your first pencil case and pencils. I carefully labelled these, and you would read your name, proudly showing off your school supplies.

When I had decided to enroll you in the first grade, I had contacted the Ithaca school district, and asked them about making sure that you were caught up. They sent me the home schooling resources for kindergarten, and in the months between finishing school in Australia, in late June, and starting in America, in early September, we worked through the entire packet. You were amazingly bright, even then, my gorgeous girl, and you went through the curriculum for an entire year in mere weeks.

Before we left Australia, I had a long discussion with Abaigael. We talked about many things, and she reminded me of the person she had met when I first started working for her. We talked about you, and my plans for your life. How I hoped it would turn out, and what I hoped you would achieve for yourself. I told her of the college fund I had set up for you, and my hopes for your education. In the course of our discussions, we agreed that I would continue to work for her, in taking on either a ‘light’ or ‘medium’ workload each week. My wages would be placed directly into your college fund each week, and she would email me my group certificates and the end of each financial year. I left her office, she hugged me, something I had never experienced from her in my years in her employment.

“Good luck, Lilly. I see you achieving great things in life. Just don’t neglect your own bliss, it deserves to be cherished,” she whispered in my ear.

Touched, I thanked her, and returned to my packing.

I arranged to leave Australia in the middle of August, giving us time to pack up our apartment, and to find a new one in Ithaca. Once more, Fern came to our aid, helping us to clean and to pack, offering her garage as a storage area until we had found a permanent address. We packed and cleaned, giving much of our furniture away, selling the washing machine, and packing our belongings into boxes and bags, ready to be stored with Fern or taken with us. I ended the lease on our apartment two weeks before we left Australia, and we returned to the room at Fern’s. She spoilt you rotten that fortnight, invoking her ‘right as a godmother to spoil her goddaughter who she won’t see for at least three years,’ overriding my protests.
Fern drove us up to Sydney airport, crying as she farewelled us. She had become such a big part of my life that I found myself bawling as I hugged her goodbye. You tugged my arm as we passed through security, offering me comfort and love. “We can ring Aunt Fern every day, mum,” you reasoned, sure in your sense of logic as only small children can be.

Our flight was uneventful, although I was glad not to be flying with an infant again. As a baby, my darling girl, you flew very well, but I found it highly stressful. Now, you were excited about the prospect of flying, excited about the aircraft, excited about a new place, and hundreds of other things. About half way through the flight, one of the flight attendants took you up to the front of the cabin, into the cockpit. You came back with you very own wings, and a look of awe.

Arriving in New York City, we made our way to our hotel. We were sharing a double bed, because I couldn’t justify the exorbitant amount of money a second bed would cost in the city. We stayed for four nights, going to two musicals, to the Statue of Liberty, and Central Park. Basically, being tourists. You were enamored with the city, and I promised that we could visit again.

On our fifth day in America, we caught a bus to Ithaca, and found our couch surfing contact. We had arranged to stay with them for a week while I looked for an apartment. Arriving more than a month before the start of term, I had been assured that it would be easy enough to find something that matched what I was looking for.

The international advisers hadn’t been wrong, and four days after arriving in Ithaca, we signed the lease on an apartment. It was bigger than the one in Australia, and for the first time in your life we had separate bedrooms. The apartment was located within walking distance of Cornell, as well as being close to a primary - elementary - school for you.

Over the next few days, we set about getting furniture for the apartment. I had talked to the real estate agents, and expressed my desire for a lease that I could extend. I really didn’t fancy moving every year we were in Ithaca. The real estate agent was very helpful, and assured me that the lease could be extended as needed. “In fact,” she confided, “the previous tenants were here for four years. The owners live in California, and don’t like the weather here, but really like the income the apartment generates, and aren’t looking to sell any time soon.”

Satisfied that I would not have to transport any white goods too often, I bought a fridge, a freezer and a washing machine. I also requested that the toilet be fitted with a dual flush system. This initially confused the real estate agent, until I explained that they were standard in Australia, and could greatly decrease the water use in a home. I had the white goods delivered, knowing that the price of delivery was far less than the stress I would feel trying to get them up the stairs myself.

We spent the next few days scouring the shops for furniture. I was only after the basics to start with - a dining table and chairs, a couch, and beds for each of us - but knew that we would have to invest
in more later, in things like bookshelves, chests of drawers, clothes storage, and so much more. I was due to receive a stipend from the university, and had saved a decent amount of money during the last few years, but I didn’t want to spend too much of it, especially so early in our stay. So, in our treks, I was looking for the cheapest decent furniture I could find. We traipsed through target and walmart, through smaller stores and specialist shops, and through the various thrift stores in the city. Finally, we visited the antique store and I discovered exactly what I had been looking for. For myself, I found a gorgeous king sized sleigh bed, and for you we found a cute day bed with trundle. Both needed new mattresses, but the antique store said that it could deliver the frames free of charge. As we were leaving, I made one last sweep of the store, when I saw the perfect dining room table. It was large, flat, clearly well worn, would seat ten or twelve people, and came with two long bench pew style seats. Each end was supported by a single central leg, on a large foot. The only problem with it was a crack in the middle of the wood. But, it was beautiful.

“Could you tell me the providence of that table? It is beautiful, it just shines with life.”

The kind lady who had helped us with beds turned to look at us. “That is an early eighteenth century monastery dining table. The legs are new, which greatly reduces the value of the item. And, of course, there is that crack. Last summer, we had an incredibly hot spell, followed by a huge electrical storm. The table just didn’t handle the air pressure changes it seems, and so that crack appeared. In its damaged state, the table is almost worthless. I can give you, with the bench seats for, say… four hundred? We can deliver it with the bed frames,” she said, clearly trying to sweeten the deal.

I didn’t know much about antique furniture, but her price seemed too high for an item she had just described as almost worthless. Testing my luck, I decided to haggle with her.

“I’ll give you three hundred for it. Including tax.”

“After the deal I just gave you on the beds? Three eighty-five, plus tax.”

“I thought it was worthless! Three ten, including tax.”

“Three eighty-five, including tax.”

“Three twenty.”

“Three seventy.”
“Three thirty.”

“Three sixty.”

“Three forty.”

“Three fifty.”

“Done.” I handed my card over to her, and turned back to look at my new table. Despite the crack, I already loved it. “You have my number, your delivery men will call when they are at my place?”

Nodding, she handed my card back. “It truly is a beautiful piece, even with the flaws. I’m glad that it found such a loving home. Not everyone would have fought for it the way you did.” Blushing, I thanked her, and we left.

Heading in search of the mattress store that I had found on the internet, we spent most of the morning trying out mattresses. I knew the type of mattress I preferred, and was delighted to find that it was known as the same thing here as all of the mattresses I had had in Australia. Selecting my hotel-motel mattress, I followed you around as you tried mattress after mattress. Eventually you settled on one known as the ‘princess mattress.’ to this day, darling girl, I don’t know if you picked it because you really liked it or because of the name.

I ordered a king sized hotel-motel mattress for myself, and two single princess mattresses for you. Paying and organising delivery, I was delighted to find that they were able to deliver them the next day. Setting a delivery time, I felt glad to have found almost all the basic furniture we needed. We still didn’t have a couch, but I figured that we could survive for a little while without one while I continued looking.

Returning to the apartment we started to put away the things we had bought - toasters, crockery and cutlery, sheets, pillows, doonas, towels. Enough to get us through the next few weeks, until we could figure out what else we needed.

True to her word the antique store delivered the beds, tables and benches at 4pm that afternoon. As we watched them bring the furniture up the stairs and into our apartment, I felt a surge of excitement. The furniture was beautiful, and was far better quality than anything I had been able to afford when we moved into the apartment in Australia.
You were so excited about all the new furniture in our apartment that you insisted on staying there that night, even without mattresses. “It’ll be like a sleepover, mummy,” you argued, and I gave in. We went to the couchsurfing house, and gathered all our stuff, thanking the host profusely before returning to our apartment.

By the time we arrived back that evening, I was exhausted, and ordered pizza, unsure what other take aways in the area delivered. Smiling, I figured it wouldn’t be long until their menus started filling our mailbox. You were thrilled with the pizza, a rare treat when we were in Australia. After eating, you quickly fell into a deep sleep, overcome by the exhaustion and excitement of the day.

When the mattresses arrived the next day, and the beds were made, the apartment finally began to feel like home to me. Surveying the apartment, I felt a glow of excitement and happiness.

We were home.
My darling daughter, the weeks we had together before you started school were magical. We were in our own little world, a land of princesses, fairees, frogs, princes, of evil step mothers and loving godmothers. We were happy, and content in the little duo we had formed.

But, I knew that it could not last. We were both growing up, and I knew that soon you would start school and would make friends in your class, and I needed to make some friends that were not five. Easier said than done when you were my whole world.

When school started, you were thrilled to be in the classroom, thrilled to be learning and making friends. And you made friends so much better than I ever did. By the end of your first week, you had four girls you assured me were your best friend “except you mummy,” two boys who wanted to be your boyfriend, and three parents who wanted to arrange play dates for you and their child. Some of these friendships worked out for you, others didn’t. Those were your battles to fight, not mine. As hard as it was, I had to take a step back, to allow you to be a kid.

In the first few weeks of your term, I picked you up every day after school. We would walk home, chatting about your day, and you would excitedly tell me what you had learnt that day, show me your art, draw me into the little bubble that was your world. In picking you up each day, I learnt which other parents did the same, who was home during the day.

I began to make friends with other mothers, knowing that these women could prove to be my greatest allies over the next few years.

I had arranged my schedule at university to allow me to drop you off at school in the morning and pick you up in the afternoons. My advisor was understanding of my situation, and allowed me to structure my days this way. I was able to arrange all of my TA duties to fall in the morning, and had my office hours over lunch. This worked perfectly for me most days, except for on Tuesday afternoons. I had successfully auditioned to play in the school’s symphony orchestra, and they rehearsed on Tuesday afternoons. While my technical ability had slipped since my last lessons, it was something I loved to do. I had played in youth orchestras throughout my childhood, and missed not only the music itself, but also the social atmosphere that surrounded the rehearsals. The last time I was in an orchestra was before you were born, playing in the second term concert in my exchange year. You were born before the final concert for the year, and I had sat in the back, ready to bolt if you had woken up during the concert.

Which, of course, my gorgeous daughter, you didn’t. You slept peacefully the entire time, your breath warming my breast as I watched the orchestra perform. So, I was excited to return to the world of classical music. The only downside was that rehearsals fell on a Tuesday night, after school.
In my conversations with other mothers, I slowly made friends with a single mother who was not much older than I was. Nessa’s daughter, Freja, was in the year above you when you started, and she worked from home, allowing her to collect Freja each afternoon. Hearing my situation, Nessa offered to look after you each Tuesday, and I gratefully accepted, knowing that I couldn’t yet afford a babysitter for those afternoons. In exchange, I would take both you and Freja swimming each Saturday morning, giving Nessa some much needed time to herself.

As the weeks progressed, Nessa and I fell into a comfortable routine. Each Tuesday she would provide dinner, and I would eat with her when I picked you up. On Saturdays, she would come round in the afternoon, and we would sit and talk over coffee and cake, and eventually make dinner before she and Freja headed home. She soon became one of my closest friends in Ithaca, a comforting presence in my life.

My darling girl, you and Freja clicked instantly. I had been afraid that you wouldn’t get along, that simply throwing you together wasn’t enough to create a friendship between the two of you, but I shouldn’t have worried. The two of you became best friends, something that made me so happy.

You were so excited when Halloween came, my darling girl. It was the first time you had celebrated it, the first time you had gone trick or treating and pumpkin carved, and you could barely contain yourself.

Nessa invited us round a few days before halloween, to carve pumpkins. I had been worrying about letting you handle big, sharp knives, but Nessa had found small, soft pumpkins that you and Freja could carve with bread knives. She told me that these ones were less than traditional, and would barely last the few hours we would go trick or treating, but that they gave her peace of mind, keeping the sharp knives from Freja. In a few years, she reasoned, she would probably let her carve the full sized pumpkins, but until then it was these soft babies.

You convinced me that I had to come trick or treating with you, and Nessa had to come with us, and that we all had to dress up. You and Freja were obsessed with fairees that year, and insisted that we all dress up as one.

You were so cute in your costume, bouncing down the street in your excitement. Nessa and I followed, a few steps behind you, as Freja excitedly explained about trick or treating, about the huge amounts of candy she had received the last year, but how cool the costumes were. As you walked, the two of you began to eat the lollies you had been given, getting more and more hyper as the sugar in your system increased.

Nessa, seeing my concern, told me not to worry, that in maybe half an hour the two of you would fall into what she referred to as a sugar coma. True to her prediction, forty minutes later both you and Freja were clinging to us, and we carried you home in our arms.
By the time Thanksgiving arrived, you and Freja were having weekly sleepovers, at either our apartment or at Nessa’s. You girls would talk for hours, pretending to be asleep whenever I cam to check on you, giggling and whispering when I closed the door.

Growing up in Australia, I had never celebrated Thanksgiving. Nessa was appalled, shocked when she found out and insisted that we go to her house for the holiday. Unsure of what was traditional thanksgiving food, I settled on bringing my Brownies with me, knowing that if they didn’t get eaten they could easily be frozen.

I almost didn’t recognise Nessa’s apartment when we arrived for dinner, my darling girl. Nessa explained that she really liked the holiday, but for the past few years it had only been her and Freja, and not as much of a party. She hadn’t told me her story by then, but I was certain that there was a lot of sadness involved, and was delighted that we were helping to make her Thanksgiving more of a holiday.

She introduced us to some of her Thanksgiving traditions, things that have stuck with us. We drew Turkey hands, decorating them, writing what we were thankful for that year, signing them, and pinning them to her wall. She had hundreds there, and said that she kept them, putting the previous year’s hands up each year, to remind herself that there was always something to be thankful for.

The dinner was a feast, more food than I thought the four of us could eat. She and I shared a few bottles of wine, and she wouldn’t let us leave after dinner, insisting that we stay the night. I was feeling quite tipsy by that stage, so readily complied. Her apartment was larger than ours, but not by much. She and I shared her bed, while you and Freja once more had a sleepover.

The next morning, we had leftover turkey for breakfast, and she sent us home with a huge doggy bag - roast vegetables, turkey, stuffing, pumpkin pie, pecan pie, yams, and green bean casserole. To this day, I don’t understand green bean casserole, but every year she gives me some in the leftovers. I haven’t ever had the heart to tell her I don’t like it.

Winter settled, and it became too cold to walk to school in the mornings. We started catching the bus, and we would marvel at the snow each morning on the way to the bus stop. I had never had a white Christmas, and was looking forward to it. Despite this, the snow got old really fast. I have always been a summer person, and much as many many people tried to talk up the snow, it never grew on me. It is cold, sticky, and when it melts, wet. Not a combination I am thrilled with. The cold weather and snow meant a whole new wardrobe. For the first time ever, I couldn’t wear skirts in winter, needing the extra warmth that thick pants offered. I would often feel like a Michelin man in the layers needed to protect against frostbite and windchill, and was counting down the days to summer.
Christmas came, and went. I had found out about a week before hand that Nessa didn’t go anywhere for the holiday, and it was usually just her and Freja. Since Thanksgiving, she had slowly been telling me more about her past, but I still didn’t have the whole story. Hearing the pain in her voice whenever she gave me any information, I didn’t push the issue. Instead, I suggested that they did Christmas with us. The way we had my entire childhood, with a large, Polish dinner on Christmas eve, presents on Christmas day and sleeping off the huge amounts of food consumed on Christmas day afternoon.

As with Thanksgiving, Nessa and I shared several bottles of wine over dinner on Christmas Eve, and there was no way I was going to let her go home like that. Knowing this would more than likely be the case, she came armed with presents for Freja, and on Christmas morning we sat around, chatting, opening gifts, and enjoying not spending the days alone in our apartments. I know that we had you, and Freja, but it seemed more like a holiday with four people, rather than just two.

A week before school had broken up for Christmas, I had been called into a meeting with your teacher, the second grade teacher and the principal. At first I had been nervous, hoping that you weren’t being bullied, or causing problems in the class, or were behind because of your skipped semester.

My fears, however, were ungrounded. In fact, rather than being behind, you seemed to be ahead of many of your classmates. Your teacher spent the first ten minutes of our meeting talking about your achievements, your intelligence, and the speed you finished your work. The she started to move on to your boredom.

“She finishes all her work in maybe a third of the time of the other students in the class. At first I simply got her to read quietly, choosing books from the shelf in the classroom, but she has read them all. The last few weeks, I have sent her to the library, and she comes back with books well above her developmental age. She is probably reading at a fourth grade level, without trouble. And her work is almost perfect. I asked her what she thought of a maths task we did the other day, something that she got perfect marks for, I might add, and she told me it was boring. And easy.

“Please don’t misunderstand me. Isadora is a pleasure to teach, and she gets along well with the other children. She doesn’t cause trouble, but I’m not sure that my classroom is the correct place for her.

“I read in her transcripts that she skipped part of kindergarten, and that you helped her through the curriculum when you moved here from Australia?” Seeing my nod, she continued. “Lilly, we must stress that as her mother and guardian, the decision is entirely yours, but we strongly recommend that she be moved to the second grade after the Christmas break. We understand that this will mean she is behind in the curriculum, but we all feel that she is well equipped to catch up within the first few weeks of the term.”
The second grade teacher spoke up then. “She often plays at lunch with one of the girls from my class, Freja. I understand that they are friends? With a friend already in the class, I think she will transition socially very well. The kids are still young enough that they won’t really realise why it is that she is now in their class, so she shouldn’t suffer too much from bullying. I will keep a close eye on her though, just in case.”

Nodding, I slowly began to process the information they had given me.

The principal turned to me, and handed me her business card. “You don’t have to make a decision today, please think on it over the week. When you have made your decision, please contact me.

“We have two additional recommendations. We understand that Isadora is very bright. As such, we think it may be prudent for you to have her intelligence tested, so that the school can more adequately cater to her needs, either by placing her in a grade that matches her intellectual needs, or by providing extra work for her in a lower grade. Secondly, we suggest that you enroll her in music lessons. Isadora shows a high level of mathematical aptitude. While there is not a direct link between mathematical intelligence and musical ability, many musicians have very high mathematical abilities. The task of learning an instrument may help to reduce her boredom at school. We have a number of teachers on staff, as well as links with the university.”

Nodding mutely, I swallowed, making sure my throat was clear before I began to speak to the three educators sitting in front of me.

“Thank you for your concern. I myself skipped several grades, and understand the frustration that sitting in classes that are far too easy can bring. I am glad that she has not acted out, disrupting your classes, but I know how stressful it can be trying to cater for someone who has such different educational needs to the rest of the class. Based on this, I really don’t need a week to think about it. Beginning next term, I would love for Isadora to be in the second grade. If it is available, I would like to take the curriculum she needs to catch up on home with me. She will be so happy to be in Freja’s class! Those two are becoming inseparable.

“Do you have someone who works in the district who can assess her intelligence? Or is that something I need to organise myself?”

Smiling, the principal let me know that someone would come to the school to assess her, and that the consent forms would be mailed to me when it was arranged. Your teacher had clearly been hoping that I would choose to move you up to the second grade, because she reached under her chair and passed me a folder containing the rest of the years first grade curriculum, and the curriculum already covered by the second grade. Promising to look into musical tuition, I left,
feeling much lighter than when I arrived.

You were thrilled with the mental stimulation learning the curriculum provided, and in the ten days we had over Christmas, you finished the first grade curriculum, and were well into the second grade work. In fact, when you arrived back at school, happy to be in Freja’s class, you were only a few weeks behind the other children.

Following the advice of the principal, I had looked into music lessons. Seeing the prices that some of the professional teachers charged, I decided to look into student teachers. Although I played the viola, I had started on the violin, and wanted to give you a choice between violin and piano. I had found you both instruments, within my price range. When I gave you the choice, you couldn’t decide between the two. So, we decided on a trial period of three months, where you would take lessons on both instruments, then you would decide which you liked better.

Darling girl, I often forgot that you were only five when we were having these discussions. You seemed so much older, so mature, that I sometimes would forget that you were just a child, my little baby.

Through my orchestra, I had found you teachers for both instruments. Both of them were international students, who spoke minimal English, and had limited ability to work. In exchange for your lessons, forty five minutes for each instrument each week, I agreed to spend an hour a week having conversations with them, helping them to improve their English. Before agreeing to this, we carefully checked each of their visa requirements, and the arrangement would not jeopardise the visas of either girl.

Your violin teacher was a tiny Indian girl, Rajkumari. She seemed shy, but I couldn’t tell if that was because if she actually was, or because she simply didn’t feel confident speaking English. The first conversation I had with her, she introduced herself, using her full name, before quickly asking me to call her Bala. Bala, she explained, just meant young, and was used as a nickname to differentiate her from a great aunt, also named Rajkumari. Bala was an undergraduate studying music at Cornell, and hoped to become a professional musician in the future. She was so tiny that I was amazed she was able to even hold her full sized instrument. Years later, she confided that her parents had commissioned a 7/8ths, unable to find an instrument that suited her size and ability.

Your piano teacher was well suited to her name, Brîska. Her name meant ‘glitter,’ she told me and it was true. You couldn’t help but watch her, she shined, glimmered, bursting with exuberant life. A Christian, Iraqui, Kurdish national by birth, she had left the country just a few weeks before she was due to start university at the beginning of the year. Days after leaving, she learnt that fighting had broken out in her home town, and she was unsure of the fate of her family, friends, everything she had ever known. She also learnt that it was unsafe for her to return home, with rebel armies persecuting non-muslims in the country, and non-Arab people within the country. Over the course of our conversations, I learnt that her family had suspected that there would be a new war break
out, and it was one of the reasons she had been allowed to come to university in the US. She had hope that her family was still alive, and had fled to Turkey. Brîska was a masters student, studying comparative literature. Her written English had only just passed the level needed for acceptance, but her spoken level was well below where it needed to be. She knew, even before I had advertised the exchange, that she needed to work on her written and verbal skills.

When I compared our schedules with Brîska and Bala, Sundays turned out to be the only time we would all be able to meet. We arranged that both girls would come to our apartment for the lessons, and the conversations. You would have your violin lesson in the morning, and Bala and I would have morning tea as we chatted. Then, you would have a piano lesson after lunch, and Brîska and I would chat over afternoon tea. For both girls, I would provide tea, coffee, and a baked good. I had found a CWA cookbook in a charity store - a rare find, given that it was an Australian book - and slowly made my way through the recipes for cakes, pies, biscuits and scones. Some worked better than others, and I soon developed favourite recipes, ones that I would repeat.

At the end of your three month trial, you still hadn’t decided which instrument you preferred. You would practice each for twenty minutes each day, and both teachers felt you were progressing nicely. I had had a short phone conversation with your second grade teacher, and she told me that while you still often finished your work well before the other children, you seemed less bored in class. While I had informed Bala and Brîska that the arrangement was only temporary, I ended up making the decision for you. I truly hope that you don’t resent my decision, but in the three months I had known both girls, I had become attached to both of them. They had both become some of my closest friends.

So, darling girl, I decided that you would continue lessons on both instruments.

A month before school ended for the summer holidays, I had another meeting with your teachers. You had sat the aptitude and intelligence testing, and the meeting was to decide the best course of action for you.

Your teachers told me that you were intellectually well above your classmates, still. You were reading at a fifth grade level, and your mathematical and spatial abilities were at a fourth grade level. Socially, you were well adjusted, and didn’t seem to be adversely affected by the grades you skipped. Again, your emotional and social intelligence scores had placed you above the average for your age.

Once again, your teachers counseled me that ultimately, the decision as to how to manage your education was mine. The told me that I could allow you to move up a single grade with your classmates, or that I could choose to skip you another grade, placing you in the fourth grade the next academic year. This time, I though far harder about my decision. You had already skipped half of kindergarten, half of the first grade and half of the second grade. You turned six at the end of the academic year. Moving you into the fourth grade would mean that you were three years
younger than your classmates, children who either would be nine, or turn nine during the year.

The thought scared me, but I knew how bright you were. You still finished all your work early, never had homework, and read voraciously. I asked if I could think on it a week, and went home to talk to you.

In the end, it was you who made the decision. You were so excited to move up to the fourth grade, excited to be learning harder things. That summer, we went through the third grade curriculum, and you absorbed it all, eager and ready to learn. The speed that you learnt things when I was working with you that summer was enough to convince me it was the right decision to let you skip another grade.

Especially when school started again, and I walked you to class, seeing just how much tinier than all your classmates you were. You looked elfin, pixie-like, tiny and breakable.

Your joy when I picked you up that afternoon washed away any residual fear I held. You were glowing with excitement, with the joy of learning and the love you had for knowledge. A week after term started again, I rang your new teacher to check your progress. I had no concerns about you academically, but was worried how you were fitting in with the other children. I really had nothing to worry about though. You had been taken under the wing by two of the girls in your class, and they seemed to protect you from the rest of the class. She said that you were fitting in well, that you were keeping up, and that you only finished your work marginally ahead of the other children.

You seemed to have hit your stride.
My darling girl, the next few years passed without any real incident. Both of us found a groove, both academically and socially, and we seemed to stick to it.

While you were in the fourth grade, I was in the second year of my PhD. I had finalised my thesis topic, and had begun to research it. I had settled on researching the links between religiosity and intelligence on teen pregnancy. Thanks to my psychology degree, I was able to be trained in the administration of intelligence testing, and so was able to get more accurate correlations between intelligence and birth rates. Religiosity was harder to research, but I had found several psychological measures that I also trained to test. My research involved traveling to communities to conduct interviews with community members, and we spent most of your mid year school breaks traveling to southern parts of America. I had limited my research to the US, but decided not to limit the religions I studied. I found it enlightening to travel to the south and talk to teen mothers, testing them and interviewing them about the reasons for teen motherhood, their experiences and the responses they had received.

I was fascinated the range of people I was able to interview, and thankful that you were happy to come with me on each of these trips. In total, I interviewed a sample of almost two hundred teen mothers, from thirty-five states and seventy cities. I would have loved to make a larger sample group, because I was highly worried about it being a true sample group, but I didn’t have funding for any other interviews.

Nessa and I had continued the tradition of you going to her house one afternoon a week, and Freja coming here once a week. I had been worried that Freja would resent you for skipping a grade above her, but luckily she didn’t. You two were still inseparable, and you had involved her in your group in school, with the two girls who took you under their wings that first day, Jessie and Maddie. The four of you became quite an unstoppable force, and soon Jessie and Maddie were included in the weekly sleepovers. You would rotate through the four families, and each time you would giggle and laugh, pretending to be asleep when you were checked on.

You continued to learn violin and piano, and I changed your lesson times to be back to back. Neither Brîska or Bala minded, and we would spend most Sundays chatting, working, and eating. As our friendship developed, so did the arrangement I had with them. They would bring me written work to edit, and on Sundays we would just hang our like friends. Often, Nessa and Freja would join us, and the conversation would continue long into the night, the coffee and hot chocolate of the day being switched for wine as evening set in.

As you got older, it became easier to arrange my study schedule. When you started fifth grade, you
started catching the bus to and from school. I would arrive home half an hour later, and we would talk about our days, our plans for the week.

By the time you started middle school in the sixth grade, I was on the home stretch of my thesis, baby girl. I would get home an hour and a half after you did, and we would talk, eat dinner, and relax. Generally, by the time I was home, you would have completed what little homework you had, and I made sure to give you my full attention. Later in the evenings, I would either work on my thesis or in my research assistant job for Abaigail, before falling into bed, exhausted.

By that Christmas, my thesis was written and handed it in. That January, I defended it, and passed. My methods were more scientific than other Gender Studies theses, but they supported my argument well enough that it wasn’t a problem. My final finding was that higher intelligence linked to lower levels of religiosity and lower levels of teen pregnancy.

I had managed to save a little money during our time in Ithaca, and that gave me a grace period to find a job. With my thesis handed in, I no longer received the full stipend from the university. However, I was still on a small wage, having several courses that I was a TA for. This gave me a bit of leeway finding a permanent position, with the university sponsoring my visa while I finished my commitments for the academic year.

In order to switch my visas across, I needed to leave the country for a day or two. So, we decided to visit Vere for Christmas. Bala, Brîska, Nessa and Freja had become regular fixtures in our holiday traditions. As a celebration of handing in my thesis, as well as Christmas, we decided to hire a van and drive up to Ottawa to visit Vere and her husband Bleddyn for the holidays. You know Bleddyn as Uncle Dyn.

The drive was long, and for the first time I drove on the wrong side of the road. I know that you don’t really remember living in Australia, that you sound American (well, not quite. You have an American accent with an Australian base. It’s cute really), but I still haven’t gotten over the cars driving on the right side on the road, not the left like when I learnt to drive at home. I was happy to be driving with Nessa by my side, because not only was I driving on the wrong side of the road, I was driving for the first time since arriving in the country almost three and a half years earlier.

Vere was thrilled to see you again. We had only visited once since arriving in America, although I spoke to her and we emailed regularly. She spoiled you silly that week, and we were lucky to have bought a van with us, otherwise we wouldn’t have been able to get all the gifts home. The holiday was fun, and I was glad to see all my friends getting along so well. Vere and the other girls bonded well, and you and Freja were thrilled to meet (or catch up with in your case), Vere’s daughter Leiya. The three of you became thick as thieves that week, and it started a weeklong trip each year, either down to Ithaca to stay with us, or up to Ottawa to stay with Vere.
Two days before Christmas eve, as I sat around, I realised that the trip was one of the best Christmas presents I had ever experienced. Almost my entire family was with me. I was only missing Ad, and Fern and Tabb. Vere saw my smile, but she also saw the sadness behind it. She didn’t ask me why, but I think she knew. Despite our years apart, nothing had changed. We were as close as ever, she was still a sister to me.

She got up, squeezing my arm on the way past. Addressing the room, she said, “Dyn and I have to go out for an hour or so, are you all okay here? I’ll have my cell with me, just call if you need anything, and help yourselves to anything in the kitchen.”

The rest of us fell back into conversation, enjoying the chance to relax away from all our responsibilities. I barely noticed the time passing that day, but when I looked up at the clock, was amazed that almost two hours had passed. Assuming that Vere and Dyn had gone Christmas shopping, and that the shops were a last minute nightmare, I thought nothing of it.

Until, about half an hour later, Vere and Dyn arrived home. As they walked into the house, there were not two sets of footfalls, but six. Hearing the voices, I looked towards the front door, wondering who had come for a visit. I assumed it was a few of Vere’s friends. How wrong I was.

Ushered by Vere and Dyn, in walked Fern, Tabb, Ad, and his boyfriend Eli (Cornelius).

I was speechless. I mean, I should have known something was happening when Vere kept insisting we make more and more of the pierogi for the Christmas Eve dinner, buying more food than I knew we would eat. But, I thought she was just getting into the spirit of over catering. It had never occurred to me that she might be catering for four extra people!

I must have been standing there like a fish out of water, my mouth silently opening and shutting. Fern walked over to me, closing the gap between us, gently closing my mouth before enveloping me in a hug.

“Merry Christmas, honey. We knew that you were handing your thesis in, and we thought it would be the perfect time to come and celebrate with you. And I have to say, I’m thrilled to be finally meeting Vere, Dyn, Ad and Eli in person. Emails and skype just aren’t the same.”

I was speechless. I just stood there, hugging this girl who had been such a rock for me at home, not sure what to say, not even sure if I was able to move with the shock and gratitude I was feeling. Slowly, my brain began to catch up, and I realised what Fern had just said.
“Wait, what? What do you mean, finally meet, and skype isn’t the same?” I stared at my friends, confused at the implications of her words.

“Do you remember how I had the room all set up for you when you first got home to Australia? Well, to figure out what you had, and what you would need, I contacted Vere and Ad. The original email I sent to them slowly morphed into something more than the information I was seeking. It, I dunno, slowly became me getting to know these two. I have kept in contact with them ever since. We became friends.” She shrugged, clearly feeling that her answer was sufficient.

“By why did you not tell me? Why didn’t you let me know that my best friends, Isa’s godparents, were friends?”

“I don’t know honey,” she replied. “Somehow, I just never got to it in conversation. Believe me, I didn’t keep the information from you out of malice.”

Mollified, I stepped back from her, turning to the rest of them, hugging them each in turn. Vere had bustled to the kitchen, and returned with a tray bearing hot chocolate, poutine, and enough forks for us all to dig in. We sat down, and Vere, Ad and Fern explained how they had arranged their trip, arranged their flights to arrive within twenty minutes of each other.

It was their present to me.

As I looked around the room, I was once again flooded with a sense of love and happiness. I was surrounded by my family, all of them. Well, that isn’t true. The gathering was missing one person, someone that I didn’t know how to contact, didn’t who even know they were part of this family. Your father. I felt a twinge of grief at the lost relationship, a feeling that happened every once and again, even now. I pushed the feeling down, determined to be happy in this gathering. I knew how rare this gathering was, considering we lived on three continents in four different countries.

Despite Jasper’s absence, I was happy, and loved.

Christmas went smoothly, with us all eating too much, with gifts exchanged, laugher and good times shared. For the dinner of Christmas Eve, we were joined by Vere’s parents, her brothers, sister, their partners and children. In total, we had twenty six people at the dinner, more than I had ever catered for. Despite my fears surrounding feeding so many people, the night went well, smoothly, as we talked, ate, and enjoyed the company of those around us.
For New Years Eve, Vere’s parents watched you, Freja and Leiya while Vere, Dyn, Fern, Tabb, Ad, Eli, Brîska, Bala and I went out for the evening. It had been so long since I had been out like this, I had forgotten the fun it would be. In some ways, I skipped parts of my development, parts like my early adult years, the years that typically have no commitments, that people my age spend partying and drinking.

As much fun as I had that night, my darling girl, I would not trade you for the world.

When we got home, and my thesis defense was finished, I began looking for jobs in earnest. I didn’t totally know what I wanted to do, despite my years of study. I applied to anything and everything, interviewed so many times that I began to feel a weird sense of de ja vue.

I was looking primarily at jobs available in Ithaca, not wanting to disrupt you from your education. While I had, and still have, certain misgivings about the American educational system, I didn’t want to disrupt you, to tear you away from your friends, and me from mine.

I had almost given up hope, and was a few days off biting the bullet and applying to jobs out of area, when I found an ad for a job the university had just made available.

It turns out, that the person due to be coming back from maternity leave the next year, had decided that she was much happier at home with her children, and so her job had opened up. It was within my department, and while outside of the area I had written on and taught about previously, touched on one of my other interests: vampire fiction.

I was so excited about this job, knowing that this was the perfect position for me. I applied, crossing my fingers that I would be interviewed. When I was rung the day after submitting my application, I could barely contain my excitement. The secretary for the department, who was scheduling the interviews, explained that with the academic year finishing in less than a fortnight, they wanted to fill the position as soon as possible. My interview was to be in four days.

I went into the interview nervous, but excited. I had researched the courses I the position covered, the requirements of the position, and I knew the department well through my time there as a PhD student. The courses were taught in the way I preferred, groups of no more than fifteen students in a seminar environment, rather than the usual lecture and tutorial combination.

As the interview progressed, I became more and more confident. The panel understood my visa position, and seemed to like me. I felt I answered the questions intelligently, and I was getting a very positive feeling from them.
When I got home, I was a nervous wreck. I desperately wanted this job, knowing it was perfect for me. Yet, I was never sure that I was qualified for anything, and kept second guessing myself. I hadn’t seen any of the other candidates, which only served to make me more and more nervous.

A totally unfounded response, my darling. Because, just two days after my interview, I was informed that I had been offered the position. I accepted immediately, thrilled to be getting a job I wanted so much. I managed to arrange a six year contract with the university, covering us until the end of your years at high school. The university would sponsor my visa, and we were able to stay in the country for the rest of your schooling.

Again, I needed to leave the country to switch my visas across. We decided to go south this time, visiting Dallas and Houston before going to Mexico. As we wandered the streets of Houston, I felt a pang of regret, of homesickness, as the accents of the city reminded me of your father.

Mexico was bustling, vibrant, everything I had expected of it. Your Spanish helped us through the country, although I knew that many of the people we encountered probably spoke English anyway.

When we returned home, we were tanned, and refreshed.

We were ready to start the next chapter of our lives, my darling girl.

Chapter End Notes

Note: once again, the thesis finding was just something I made up. I have no idea if there is any link between religiosity or intelligence or teen pregnancy. There is a large amount of data that shows abstinence only education, which is generally delivered in tandem with religious schooling, does not decrease teen pregnancy, and often increases teen pregnancy rates.

For those of you wondering, poutine is a Canadian dish that consists of hot chips covered in gravy and melted cheese.

North americans, a fortnight is two weeks. While used frequently in both Australian and UK english, the term confuses most of my north american friends.
I promise, we're getting close to the Twilight gang...

My darling girl, you breezed through middle school. It was easy for you, alarmingly so, but you were already three years younger than your classmates, and I really didn’t want to have you skip another year. None of your teachers thought it was necessary though, which relaxed me.

Your years at middle school were almost like a holding pattern, with you just waiting to get to the good stuff, the real education.

To high school.

Your first week of high school was possibly the most frightening time of my life. You were ten, and tiny. Something you clearly inherited from me. There is no way that you would have been so petite if your father’s genes had anything to do with it. Not with his six foot frame. No, you had me to blame for your tiny stature. Although, having met your aunt Alice now, who is even tinier than I am, it is possible that your father’s genes did help with your tininess. But, a bigger factor was probably the fact that you were ten. Your classmates were fourteen and fifteen, all in puberty, all through their growth spurts. They towered over you, and it scared me. I was thrilled that Jessie and Maddie continued to be your friends, shielding you from the larger kids around you. Socially, intellectually, you fit in so well with the older kids, but I still felt a pang of panic each time I saw you surrounded by them. Because, there was no way you fitted in physically.

You loved your classes at high school. You were so excited whenever you got home, telling me about your day, about what you learned, about your homework, and assignments. You were on the pathway to take AP classes in your final year, and were loving the academic rigour that was already being required of you, in preparation. You were happy, and that allayed all my fears.

Two weeks after you started high school, I gave you what I am sure you still think is the strangest gift I have ever given. But please, hear out my logic. It makes sense. Really.

I know what it is like to have skipped grades. I skipped two myself, graduating at fifteen. You are a year ahead of me, you’ll graduate high school at a mere fourteen years of age. So, I know what it is like to be exposed to that world. To be surrounded by people who are experiencing, experimenting with their sexuality, who have gone through puberty.
So, in those first weeks of high school, I bought you a vibrator. Mainly, because I needed something to help me open the door to communication. I know we had talked about sex before then, but I really didn’t want our relationship to be like the one I had with my mother. When I was maybe eleven, she left two books of sex, one on reproduction and one on puberty on my desk with a stack of pads. That was our discussion. I wanted to be able to talk about these things with you, to have it not be a taboo subject, one that we buried our heads like ostriches and ignored.

And so, I got you the vibrator. As a communication tool, it totally worked. We had a long conversation about sex that day. You were curious what the vibrator did, what the point was, what an orgasm felt like. You asked me why I didn’t date, if sex hurt, and so much more. We talked and bonded, and I was left with a pleasant feeling, knowing that you at least had enough information to guide yourself through high school.

I did make one thing very clear. That the age of consent is there for your protection, and while I had nothing against you having sex, I really, really wanted you to wait until you were at least able to legally consent. We discussed the different laws of consent, but I made sure that you understood that in New York the age of consent was seventeen. We talked about the inconsistencies of the law, and how if you crossed the border into Canada, provided that the person you were having sexual contact with was less than two years older than you, the age of consent was as young as twelve, and how in Australia, the age of consent was sixteen. We talked about what consent even meant, and that you could stop at any point. How consent was not always verbal. How the boy (or girl) had to respect your boundaries, and when you said no, they had no right to go any further, no right to try to ignore your wishes. How once you said no, any further action that you don’t consent is sexual abuse or rape.

We talked about contraception, and how it wasn’t perfect. I had never hidden the fact that you were unplanned from you, but that night, I told you far more than I ever had. I explained how I was on the pill, and how we used condoms, but that I still fell pregnant. We talked about STDs, or STIs. The terminology has changed since I was a teenager, and I still get confused as to which is the correct term. By the time I have it figured out, it will probably change again.

And we talked about orgasms. How yours was just as important as the guys. That you could have mind blowing orgasms, and sex was better if you did. Less painful, more enjoyable. And that the orgasm was not a bartering chip. That no one had the right to say ‘if I do this for you, I expect you to do that for me.’ I didn’t try to explain the feeling of an orgasm to you, saying you would understand when you had one, and that with the right person, they were better than anything you could ever imagine. I encouraged you to try the vibrator if you were curious, or not. It was your choice. I never did ask if you tried it out, because I really didn’t want to know.

The conversation was uncomfortable and awkward at times, and we both spent a lot of time blushing, but I was glad we had had it. I was glad that our relationship allowed us to be so open with each other. Or, had allowed us to be open enough to have the conversation.
Three weeks into your freshman year, you begged to be allowed to try out for the cheerleading team. I knew that like everything else you did, you would shine, that there was no way you couldn’t get into the squad. But, your size scared me. I had been to games at Cornell, and while the cheerleaders were amazing to watch, the flyers had a really dangerous task. And you were, still are, so small that I was petrified you would become a flyer.

So, reluctantly, I gave my permission for you to try out.

Of course, you got onto the squad. So did Maddie, although Jessie had no interest in even trying out. That first year, you were on the reserve squad, building up stamina, strength and flexibility. You learned all the cheers that the A squad knew, just in case any of you had to be called in last minute to fill a space. It happened at two basketball games, and one football game. Each time you stepped onto court, onto the field, I was petrified for you, proud of you. The emotions warred inside me. That first year, your feet stayed firmly on the ground, and pride mostly won.

From the second year onwards, that all changed. You were moved up to the A squad, and made a flyer. You had to beg me for a week to sign the permission forms for that one. I knew that you would be brilliant, but I was so scared for you, being thrown and caught by the other kids. The one thing that made me feel slightly better was having seen the flyers the previous year. The people catching them were mainly boys, big strong boys at that.

The first game you performed at, as a flyer, I almost couldn’t watch. My fear definitely won. Sitting next to me, Nessa calmed me, holding my hand, talking to me as you were thrown, as you kicked and spun.

I was right about one thing. You were amazing.

Being on the cheer squad gave you a whole new group of friends. The other girls were fiercely protective of you, a quality I was pleased with in them. You made friends with the footballers and basketballers, and you had a big burly boy to escort you from each class. I was initially concerned that the boys would take advantage of you, but after observing you talk to them after matches, I began to feel better. They acted like big brothers, stubbornly protective.

Your friendship with the cheerleaders put you on the top of the high school food chain. Yet, at the same time, you were friends with the other geeks in your classes, with the drama and music students. In fact, I was sure that you were friends with everyone in the school. I know that is an exaggeration, but it felt like that.
You started to be invited to parties, hosted by people from all social groups. More often than not, your verbal invitation would be accompanied by a business card for a parent, or a scrap of paper with a number scribbled on it. Those parties that you didn’t get a phone number from, I simply refused to let you go to. Of the rest, I would talk to the parents, get a feel of the supervision, who would be there. And if I felt it wasn’t going to be a kegger, I would let you go. I know that embarrassed you, but you are the most important part of my world. Your safety means everything to me.

My job with the university was going well, and I was enjoying it. I found that I genuinely enjoyed my interactions with the students, although most of them were surprised to see just how young I was. Because I had finished school early, and not done a masters program, even with my five year undergrad degree and time off, at thirty I was still younger than any of them expected to be when they finished their PhDs. And, that was my second year teaching. Several of my students were actively considering the masters or PhD route, and none of them expected to be finished before they were twenty-nine or thirty, and I had already been working several years.

I loved the material I was teaching, and the opportunity it gave me to read vampire fiction. The genre had always been a guilty pleasure of mine, so to be able to read it for my job was wonderful. My bookshelves slowly filled with the books, modern and classic. Several held special positions in my heart. Dracula, The Vampire Academy, and The Historian were among my favourites, and I was looking forward to the release of The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner later that year. It was a book set within one of my favourite vampire worlds, the Twilightverse. The first four books had been released in the two years after we arrived in America, and I had often read them to relax my mind before I went to bed.

The small group classes provided me an opportunity to use a variety of teaching methods, and my favourite became getting the students to present a short seminar on a specific vampire text. They would be expected to pick a book (or, a series, depending on the depth and sophistication of the writing), and select a chapter for the class to read, along with a theorist to use to analyse the text. They often surprised me in their choices, and while I knew that public speaking was a fear for many students, the small group atmosphere made it easier for them to present.

I continued to work for Abaigael, and put money into your college fund. It was slowly growing, and I hoped that it would be enough to cover your fast approaching higher education. Because of the stipend I had received while doing my PhD, I hadn’t used all of my college fund, and so was able to donate a decent proportion of it to your college fund. You still didn’t know where you wanted to go to school, but as I you really didn’t have to figure that out until your senior year, I didn’t press you about it. Although, I did make it clear that you didn’t have to stay in Ithaca. In fact, you didn’t even have to stay in America. I had become tenured at Cornell, and while it would be a pain to move to a new university and have to go through that process again, I was prepared to do it. I just couldn’t imagine sending you to dorms all by yourself at only fourteen.

As you went through high school, you stayed on the principal’s list every semester. I was so proud of you, so proud of your achievements. The principal’s roll meant you had a GPA above 4.0 each
semester, so I knew that you would have no problems getting into whatever college or university program you wanted. The whole GPA thing still confuses me. I had always thought that a GPA only went to 4.0, but it seemed to go higher, at least at your high school.

In the summer before your senior year, we began the process of looking at schools for you. I had saved carefully, and organised a two week trip to the UK for us, to visit Oxbridge, University College London, Imperial College London, King’s College London, Edinburgh Uni, Manchester and Bristol. And, of course to visit Ad and Eli. The trip was a bit of a whirlwind visit, but by the time we left, you had decided that you didn’t want to go to any of the London universities, or Bristol or Manchester. For the UK, we had managed to narrow the list down to just three possibilities: Edinburgh, Cambridge and Oxford. And, thanks to the admissions process for Oxbridge, just two applications.

America was harder. You were interested in all of the Ivy schools, Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, Pennsylvania and Yale. Luckily, all of them were nearby, so the trips were easy. You were also interested in Duke, Stanford, UCLA and UCB in the US, McGill, UBC and Toronto in Canada. You had briefly looked at my undergrad university, the Australian National University, but decided it wasn’t right for you. While I did occasionally miss Canberra (especially when it snowed. I still really hate snow), I wasn’t worried that you didn’t want to return to the country I had stopped calling home many years before.

You ruled out most of the big city universities almost immediately, and slowly narrowed your list down. I let you do this on your own, not worried that you would make the wrong choice. You also looked into scholarships at each of the possibilities. Despite being counted as an international student at all the places you were considering, your grades and US education meant that you were eligible for a large number of the scholarships.

The week before you stated your senior year, you had narrowed your list down to two UK universities, Cambridge and Oxford; two Canadian universities, McGill and Toronto; and five US universities Brown, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, Yale. I knew that whichever one you eventually chose, I would be able to get a job somewhere on staff. In your thirteen years of life, you were still the centre of my universe, and I was prepared to go wherever you needed me to.

That year, you loved your AP classes. You loved the stimulation they provided, and I swelled with pride each time you received a grade for a piece of work.

Slowly, throughout the year, responses began to trickle in from the universities you had applied to. Every university you had applied to had accepted you, with the exception of Oxbridge. Because of their admission policy, you had been accepted to Oxford university. Half of the universities had offered you scholarships, ranging from partial to complete cover of your tuition costs.
I swear, every time we received one of those envelopes in the post, you looked so shocked. You really didn’t seem to believe that you could get into any of them, let alone all of them. In some ways, it made your decision harder. You had hoped to have some of the decisions made for you, to have some universities ruled out because they didn’t accept you. Instead, you were faced with nine acceptance letters. And then the hard part began.

You still weren’t sure what exactly you wanted to do with yourself. My darling girl, I am not surprised by this. I mean, what thirteen or fourteen year old does? I still don’t know how you came to this conclusion, but somehow you stared to rule out options. In the end, you were left with three choices. Brown, Oxford and McGill. They were all offering you scholarships for full tuition, and all required a move. They all had subjects that you were interested in, and all had high academic standings. All three were top thirty universities.

Having gotten to this decision, you slowly began to narrow the choices down. We couldn’t afford to visit Oxford again, but revisited both Brown and McGill. In these visits, I began to get a sense of your decision. I think the size of McGill scared you, as did the bilingualism, and I think Oxford was just too far away for you.

And so, a week after revisiting the campus, you had accepted your place in Brown University.

Darling girl, I was so proud of you and your decision.

I immediately set about find a job for myself at Brown. I was lucky, and they had a very strong Gender Studies department. My tenure at Cornell, as well as my years of teaching experience, and wide ranging interest and knowledge base seemed to put me in a good position. Less than a week after sending a general application, I was contacted for an interview. After an initial half hour phone interview, I went to Brown for a longer, face to face interview. During the interview, I explained my situation with you, and was hired on the spot. This stunned me, but also gave me the confidence to negotiate a higher salary, and a four year contract with visa sponsorship and the possibility of a longer contract if I wished.

The day that Brown offered me the contract, I finally quit my job with Abaigael. Working for her for twelve years had been amazing, a lifesaver really, but I was tired. I had worked my butt off to provide for you, and I needed the break. Abaigael was amazing. She gave me a huge bonus, as thanks for the years of work I had put into the company. I carefully put the bonus into a high interest bank account, earmarking it as a deposit for a house.

And with that, before you even graduated from high school, we were set up for the next four years of our lives. I had a job, you had a school, we had a plan.
I swear, the day you graduated was the proudest moment of my life my darling girl. Your school went all out, robes, caps, speeches, the whole shebang. I had known how good your grades were. You were in honours or AP classes, on the principals list, getting consistent A+’s.

What I didn’t realise was that you were valedictorian.

You had insisted on me coming to your graduation, and I had readily agreed. There was no way I was missing it, no way that I would be anywhere but in the gym that day.

I was truly touched by your speech. You talked about the people you had met, the friends you had made while here. The acceptance the school had offered, despite being so much younger than your peers. How you could, just have easily, been a target for bullying. And then, you talked about me. You told them the fairee tale. I hadn’t told it to you in years, yet you remembered it word for word. You explained what it had meant to you, and what it should mean to the rest of your class. That it didn’t matter what happened, life was a fairee tale, something to be enjoyed. That sometimes the wicked witch would put a curse on you, but if you looked, there was always a fairee godmother to make it right again. You encouraged your classmates to look around the room. “These are your fairee godmothers. Each of us has the power to help fix what the wicked witch has done. Each of us can be a fairee godmother to someone else. Take that, and put it to use. Congratulations, my graduating friends!”

I couldn’t help but cry at the end of my speech. I knew who my fairee godmothers were. They are your godparents.

And you, my darling daughter, you were the best gift I had ever gotten.
My darling girl, but the time you graduated high school I had given up any hopes of ever finding Jasper. The trail was cold, and let's face it, 'Jasper from Houston' was never a very good lead anyway. Although there were moments that my heart ached for him, still, almost fifteen years after I had last seen him, I knew that I didn't really expect anything from him. He was a gorgeous boy, who would have grown into an amazing gentleman.

The one thing I wanted was to tell him that he had a daughter, and that she was beautiful.

A week before we moved to Providence, the night of your prom and final sleepover, Brîska, Bala, Nessa and I went out on a final girls night out. You girls ranged in age from fourteen to eighteen, so we figured it was safe to leave you at home for one last sleepover. After all, we would all be saying goodbye to some close friends in a few short days. To parts of our family.

While you girls sat around at home, eating pizza, doing makeup, and really, god knows what else, we went out to dinner, a movie, and were thinking of going dancing.

Dinner was pleasant, and I greatly enjoyed the company of the women sitting at the table with me. I was sad to know that we would be leaving them soon, but knew that we would keep in touch. After all, we were only a few hours drive away, far better than the half way around the world like some of my other friends. The conversation flowed easily, and I was glad for a final night with these women.

As we moved from the restaurant to the cinema, we continued chatting. We arrived in the cinema with plenty of time to spare, and despite having just eaten dinner, I ordered a nachos from the candy bar. I rarely ate these any more, and I had not delusions that they even resembled real food, but I had become hooked on them while I was in England. I blame Vere, despite the fact that she didn't eat them herself. She would grab popcorn, which I don't eat, and something had made me try the weird nachos. I loved them, and they became part of my cinema experience. Vere and I went to a lot of films the year we were in England, so I had eaten a lot of cinema nachos.

Settling into the cinema seats, I relaxed, looking forward to the movie. As always, I watched the trailers, earmarking the ones I wanted to see later. Some seemed a little, well, pointless, or
uninteresting to me. Others seemed to have a little bit of potential. I was excited to see one trailer though. The previous year, my favourite book, The Gunslinger had been transformed into a movie. Though I knew how bad the adaptation could potentially be, I had gone to see it and was amazed. The film makers had been incredibly true to the book while making the film interesting and lively, and without making it hideously long. I had never encountered any of the actors before, but thought they all, especially the boy who played Jake, had real potential. I had heard rumours from friends that the second book was also going to be transformed into a film, but had yet to see any real evidence of it.

So, when I once more saw Roland walking along the screen, I couldn’t help but give a small squeal of joy. Drawing of Three had been turned into a movie! I was in seventh heaven, or there abouts. I continued to watch, eager to see who had been cast as Eddie and Sussannah, when he appeared on my screen.

Jasper.

Jasper was playing Eddie.

If I hadn’t been sitting down already, I would have fallen over. As it was, I nearly fainted with shock. The boy I had met had been about to start university. He was undecided about what he was going to do, but was thinking of majoring in history and fine arts, not acting.

But the person on screen was unmistakably Jasper.

I’m not sure what else was advertised before the movie. I’m not even sure what the movie was like. Honestly, I can’t even remember the name of what we went to see. I was in a state of shock, numb to the outside world. When the credits rolled and the lights brightened, my friends chatted brightly, and I followed them from the cinema, deep in thought. While they knew about the situation with Isadora’s father, I had never given them the full version of the story. Vere and Ad were the only two who I had told, in those days after my initial shock at being pregnant passed.

I have no idea what the girls thought about my behaviour after the movie. But, thankfully, they didn’t question it. They let me be a bit numb, making sure I got home safely, before returning home themselves. I briefly checked in with you girls, then locked myself in my room. For the first time since we moved to Ithaca all those years ago, I actually used the lock on my bedroom door.

As soon as I was locked in and settled on my bed, sitting cross legged with the lap top in front of me, I logged onto imdb, looking up the new Gunslinger movie. Looking for his name. Something that I had wanted for the last fifteen years.
I quickly found the movie, and scrolled through the names of actors. As I scanned the photos, I saw him. His photo reminded me of the guy I had met on my tour. He looked younger, somehow. I moved my eyes across the screen, searching for his name. Next to his picture, there for the world to see, was his name.

Jasper Brandon Whitlock.

I clicked on his name, desperate to find out more of the man that I had stupidly left all those years ago. The man that didn’t know of you, his brilliant daughter’s existence.

_Drawing of Three_ was not only his first film, but the first and only piece of professional acting listed. He didn’t have a bio past his birth date. Mentally calculating, the birth date matched my dates for his age, making him not only look right and have the right first name, but making him the right age. Frustrated with the lack of information imdb was giving me, I moved onto google. I didn’t get a whole lot more from google, but I did get his agent’s website. Again, I didn’t get a bio for Jasper, so had no way of knowing anything else he had done in the last decade and a half.

What I did get, however, was his agent’s name. Victoria Samson-Radcliff. All her standard contact details were listed, and I figured that if I contacted him before the movie came out, I wouldn’t seem too crazy fan stalkerish.

But first, I had to make some phone calls. I quickly did the calculations of time differences for England and Ottawa, and decided that it was an okay time to call given the circumstances. Quickly, I dialled Vere’s number, and when she picked up, I made the conference call to Ad. I knew the phone bill was going to be huge that month, but couldn’t find it in myself to care.

Hearing that they were both successfully in the conversation, I started speaking. “So, I have news guys. Are you both near computers?”

The both confirmed that they were, indeed, near a computer and I asked them each to youtube the _Drawing of Three_ trailer.

Once they had both watched it, I started to tell my story. “I went to the movies today. And we saw that trailer. I can’t even tell you what the movie was, or if it was any good. All because of that trailer. I was so excited when I came on. I have totally been looking forward to _Drawing of Three_ coming out. I was stoked to see if they had unknowns playing Eddie and Sussannah, or if famous faces were going to jump on the band wagon.” Drawing a deep breath, I steeled myself for what I
was going to say next. “So, you saw the guy that played Eddie? I imdb’d him. His name is Jasper Brandon Whitlock. He’s my Jasper. Isadora’s dad Jasper. He’s playing a character in one of my favourite books. Books I introduced him to. What do I do? He’s going to be all famous now. And I’m just little me. How do I tell about his daughter? How do I explain that I tried to find him, but the tour company wouldn’t tell me his name? What if he has found someone else, and doesn’t want to know Isadora? What do I do?”

I was wailing by the time I finished talking. I had wanted for so long to have a way to find Jasper, to have some way to contact him, that now I did I had no idea what to do with it.

My darling girl, please don’t misunderstand. I haven’t had a lack in my life, not really. I know I basically haven’t dated since I had you, but I have been happy. I have wonderful friends, a wonderful support network, and most importantly, I have you. You fill me with so much love, that I don’t need anything else. Anyone else.

But, it worries me that you haven’t had a male influence on your life, that you haven’t had a chance to know your father. That fates stepped in and stopped us from having at least a chance of a life together.

It was Ad who replied to my wailings. “Baby girl, calm. Isn’t this a good thing? Isn’t it something that you have wanted? Maybe Mr Sex-God has moved on, and if he has then it is his loss. You and that beautiful girl are amazing. I mean, she turned fourteen what, yesterday? Last week? And is about to start college! And you, you have matured into such an amazing, beautiful, wonderful woman. He would be insane to not want anything to do with you. And if he has found someone else, then you will have to find a way to deal with that. Because, through no fault on either of your parts, it has been almost fifteen years since you last saw him, almost fifteen years that he has not known about Isadora. He had no reason not to move on.

“But, damn girl, he’s hot. Age has agreed with him.”

The strangely American phrase sounded so weird coming out of my proper (if highly flamboyant) English friend’s mouth that I couldn’t help but laugh.

“He doesn’t have his own contact details listed, but his agent does,” Vere started. “I know it is a gamble contacting him through her, because by adding a third party, messages might get lost or confused, but Lilly? I think Victoria might be your best option for telling him.

“You and Isa are still coming up next week to change you visa, right? Well, we can figure out how to write that letter to him then. Does that sound okay? Can you wait the week?”
Nodding mutely, I realised my friends were on the phone with me. “Yes. Can we skype you Ad?”

“Of course, you silly girl. As if you’d be able to stop me from getting involved in this! I’ll fly across there if I have to.”

As always, Vere and Ad, my fairee godmothers, had managed to calm me, and I no longer felt like I was going to explode. The world came back into focus, and I began to plan.

The first thing, of course was to talk to you. I looked at the time, and realising it was after 4am. And that you had friends around. So, clearly not the time. But later that day, after I had slept, after your friends had gone home, I knew I would have to talk to you. I just didn’t know what to say.

That evening, when I sat you down to talk, I was still at a loss for words. Trying to buy myself time, I showed you the trailer for the *Drawing of Three*, then the imdb profile for Jasper.

Drawing a deep breath, I blurted out the only words that I could, the words that had been swirling round my head since seeing the trailer at the cinema the night before.

“The guy playing Eddie is Jasper Brandon Whitlock, your father.”

I don’t really know what I expected from you, but it definitely wasn’t the reaction you gave.

“Oh. Good. When do I get to meet him?”

I was too shocked by your response to even think of something to say. I just sat there, staring at you. So you filled the silence.

“Mum, come on. You are still in love with him. Clearly you’re going to contact him. And while you seem really freaked out at the moment, you will deal with this. You raised me by yourself, studied for eighteen months of the first two years of my life, and moved us half way across the world so that you could finish your education. You have saved enough for me to go to any school I want, anywhere. You are about to move away from a job that I know you love, just because I want to go to school somewhere else. You taught me three grades, each in a few short weeks. You had the strength to walk away from your parents when they wanted you to adopt me out.
“You’re the strongest person I know. And I know that you are happy with your life. But don’t pretend you don’t miss him, didn’t sometimes wish that he was here with us, that he was part of your life. Part of our lives.

“So, you have to tell him. But, I think you should do a DNA profile of me. It might make him, or his management, take you a bit more seriously. Because, I mean, if you’re going to go to the trouble of including a DNA profile of the child of his that you claim to exist, it makes it a bit more believable. A bit less ‘I’m-a-crazy-stalker-fan’, or ‘I’m-a-gold-digger-just-wanting-to-get-some-of-your-fame-and-money’. A bit more like your claim is real.

“And mum, you’re amazing. He was clearly very into you fifteen years ago, I mean, I’m evidence of that. He would be stupid not to want to be part of our lives now. And if he is stupid, then that is his loss.”

I was so amazed and proud of you at that moment. You were still my little girl, but somehow along the way, you had become this mature being. My gorgeous girl, you calmed me that day, made me believe that it was all going to be okay. You became my rock, my stability.
My darling girl, our apartment was almost entirely packed up the day we left to go visit Vere. When we returned home, we would have two days to finish everything before we left for Providence. It was exciting and frightening, the feelings warring with each other.

But, of course you know all this. You helped me through, and became an active participant in the move. You packed and cleaned, rang removalists, did things that the last time we moved, I had to do on my own.

We had yet to find a house to live in, but I was looking at several places in the East Providence area, close enough to the university that we could walk, bike or bus in, but far enough away that the rent was not astronomical. And, far enough away that we could finally live in a house with a backyard. While we fitted in our apartments, we didn’t crowd each other, I missed the ability to sit in the sun in the backyard, to read, and grow plants larger than the herbs I grew on our windowsills in our apartments.

Visiting Vere again was lovely. The amazing girl I had met in my exchange year had grown and matured, and had become a mildly successful writer. Her name was slowly growing, and I knew that her fame would only increase with time. Every time she released a new book, she sent me a signed copy, and I had them each carefully packed, and they lived on a shelf in my room. I always bought an unsigned copy of the books to read. I knew it was silly, but one day her signed books would be very valuable. They are part of your inheritance. But, until then, the sentimental value far outweighed what they could ever be worth monetarily.

She had taken a week out of her writing schedule to have us visit. Once again, you and Leiya got along so well, and you visited the city together, shopped and talked. You kept each other occupied while Vere and I sat down to the frightening task of writing the letter to Jasper.

The process was long, and I won’t bore you with it. Suffice to say, it took us most of the week to come up with the final letter. We had skyped Ad almost every day, and with his input, we came up with something we hoped would get through Victoria to Jasper.

The letter ended up being short, and simple. Or, as short and simple as it could possibly be, given the circumstances. You saw the letter before we sent it, but this book would be incomplete without a copy of it.

Dear Jasper,
My name is Lillian Delphine Haig. You know me as Lilly. We met almost fifteen years ago, on a tour through Canada and New England. I was seventeen at the time, and about to start and exchange year at an English university. You were just eighteen, and about to start your own degree. I never knew where. We had an amazing week together, and parted as friends. We parted without ever knowing each other’s last names. When we parted, I gave you a book, my favourite book, The Gunslinger. You gave me a cowboy hat. I still have that hat.

Parting that way is something that I deeply regret. I knew you as ‘Jasper from Texas,’ information nowhere near specific enough to find you again. I tried to find you after the tour, but the tour operators told me that because of privacy laws, they were unable to tell me your surname.

Even after I explained my situation to them.

You see, despite all our precautions that week, I became pregnant. I wanted nothing more than to tell you, but I had no way of contacting you. Until now.

When I saw you in the trailer for the Drawing of Three, and almost fainted.

Your daughter, Isadora Jasper Haig, was born on June 2, 2008. She turned 14 last month. She is amazing. She starts college next in a few months time. I know that she is really young, but she is so bright, Jasper. She received a scholarship covering her full tuition costs to Brown, because of her amazing academic standing.

I know that this must be a shock to you, but when I saw you in that trailer, I knew I finally had a chance to let you know that you were a father.

I got my PhD when Isa was 8, and I have been working as a lecturer at Cornell university since. When Isa starts at Brown in the fall, I will be starting a teaching position there. We are comfortable and happy.

I tell you this, because I want you to know that we don’t need anything from you. We haven’t realised that you are famous and want your money. I tell you this, because I have spent the last fifteen years wishing that I could tell you about your daughter.

I have included a copy of Isadora’s DNA profile. It is a legal profile, properly notarised and acceptable for any court in the country. You have no reason to believe my claim, but I ask that you
have your DNA profile compared to Isa’s. She cannot be any other man’s child.

I have included a photo of her and I at her high school graduation. She was valedictorian. I know that you have never met her, but you would have been so proud. I am.

She knows all about you. I have told her about you since she was born, and she knows that her father didn’t leave because he didn’t love her. She knows that her father isn’t around because of a simple miscommunication. She holds no ill feelings towards you, and neither do I. She hasn’t said it, but I know she would like to have a relationship with you.

Jasper, we understand if you don’t want any contact with us. We don’t want money from you, and cannot compel you to have any contact with either of us. I didn’t know your surname when Isa was born, so your full name isn’t on her birth certificate. I have no way of legally binding myself to you in order to force you to spend time with us. Not that I would want to. If you don’t want to hear from us again, please send us a message letting us know. My email address and phone number are at the bottom of the page. We will be moving in a week, and I still don’t have an address for us when we do.

I am sorry that I had to send this to your manager, to Victoria. But, I had no other way of contacting you. I hope that this gets passed onto you.

Yours,

Lilly

Lillian Delphine Haig

My darling girl, sending that letter was one of the scariest things I had ever done. Once it was in the post, it was out of my hands. I had to rely on the postal service to deliver it to Victoria’s office, and for Victoria to pass it onto Jasper.
Isa, when we got to Providence, our first priority was finding a house. Our lease didn’t expire in Ithaca for another month, and Nessa had agreed to talk oversee the removalists taking our stuff out, having cleaners come in, return keys and all those end of lease things. It gave us room to breathe, room to find a house.

After living in apartments for the last twelve years, after renting for the same amount of time I wanted to move into a house, and I wanted to own it. We had appointments to look at six houses, but only got to the second one. It was perfect, not too big or small, with a decent sized backyard. We both fell in love, and signed the agreement on the spot. We settled it three weeks later, once I had secured a loan. Despite not being a resident, it was amazingly easy to do. I think the fact I had been living her for the last eight years, and that you were enrolled in college, and that I had a secure job for the next four years made in easy. That, and thanks to the bonus I got when I finished working for Abaigael, I had a sizeable deposit behind me.

The house was what I always thought of as traditional American. It had big, wrap around porches, two levels, gable windows, and the sloping porch roofs that you can sit on. It even had a wisteria trellis, already established and covering a paved area at the back.

And with that, we suddenly had a house. Nessa arranged for the removalists to come the next day, and three days after signing the agreement, our house was filled with the furniture we had. The house was more than double the size of our apartment, so suddenly we needed more furniture. We once again set about finding what we needed, although this time we started at the antique stores. We found a sleigh bed for the guest bedroom, bedside tables, a coffee table, and a full length mirror. The bed needed a new mattress, and we needed more bookshelves. These were easy to obtain, and we had them all delivered two days later.

And with that, our house became a home. Our home.

My darling daughter, I was shocked when late on the Monday night, less than a week after we arrived in Providence and less than a fortnight after posting the letter, I got a call from Alice.

Alice, Jasper had told me during our conversations on tour, was his big sister. And his only family.
His parents had both died several years previously, and she had become his guardian, his best friend. He told me how protective she was, how she had battled for him to be put into her care, not into the foster care system. He told me of her strength, and her kindness. Of how family meant everything to her, and that she would battle anyone who threatened her family.

So, when she introduced herself, I almost dropped the phone in my panic to finally hear the voice of the girl who had seemed so frightening to me all those years ago.

“Lilly?” Alice asked after I answered the phone.

“Yes, this is Lillian Haig. May I ask who is calling please?” Her number had come up as private or restricted, and I didn’t recognise her voice on the other end of the phone.

“Lilly, my name is Alice. Mary-Alice Brandon Whitlock. I am Jasper’s older sister. Which, I guess, makes me Isadora’s aunt. You sent my brother a letter a bit over a week ago, right?”

“Y..Yes. Yes, Alice, I sent Jasper a letter telling him that he is a father. I didn’t know how else to contact him.”

“Oh, Lilly, sweety, don’t be worried. I’m not ringing you to yell at you. I’m actually ringing you to ask if I can meet you. I only have one day off this week, on Thursday. I’m not able to leave the city, so I was wondering if you could come here? To Seattle? Are you free Thursday?”

“Umm… I’m free… But Alice, I don’t think I can afford to fly there on such short notice. Or on long notice either. My budget is kinda tight. I would love to meet you… but last minute flights are expensive…”

“Don’t be silly. I would fly you here and back. At my own expense. Don’t worry about the cost. Are you alright leaving Isadora alone for a night? What with the transit times and time differences, I will probably have to put you on a red-eye home. Is that okay? If it isn’t, let me know, but then you loose a whole extra day… and you have to leave Isadora alone for two days. But I guess if she is starting college, she is kinda independent, yes? I will book the flights now, and send you the itinerary. I have your email address, so I guess I will see you at the airport on Thursday?” She sounded so excited, I couldn’t help but smile. And could barely get a word in. I agreed where she needed me to, allowing her whirlwind to surround me, to plan for me.

“Of course. Ummm… can I have your number? In case anything happens? A red-eye is fine, cos I
would rather not be away from Isa for too long. It makes me nervous.”

“Sure.” She rattled off her number, and I quickly scribbled it down. “I’ll email the itinerary through. See you on Thursday! Bye!”

And, with that she hung up. I sat back, reeling at the strange conversation I had just had, the trip I had just agreed to. I knew that you would be safe here for a night, but I still felt bad about leaving you in such an unfamiliar city by yourself, so soon after we moved.

As Thursday approached, I became more and more apprehensive. I was glad, in some ways, that Alice had only given me two days to worry about things, about meeting her. I was confused why she was the one I would be meeting, not Jasper, but decided not to dwell on it too much.

Alice, true to her word, had emailed through the travel itinerary, and tickets. My flight departed at 6am on Thursday morning, and with one stop over, I would arrive in Seattle a little after 11am, local time. Coming back, I left at 1030pm, arriving back in Providence at about 9am the next day. I once again had to change planes on the way home, and really didn’t look forward to the bleariness I knew I would feel after the night flight.

Jasper had explained that Alice was a fashion designer of some sort, but I had never heard of her. So, I was shocked to see that the tickets Alice had sent me were first class. I had never even dreamed of flying first class, knowing that the likelihood of ever having that sort of money was slim to none.

As I was only going for the day, I had no check in bags, only my carry on. Knowing Seattle’s reputation for being wet and rainy, I packed my raincoat, and a change of shoes. I dressed in layers, having heard that the city could change weather suddenly, and not wanting to be stuck in clothing that was too hot or cold. As I checked in at the ungodly hour of 5am, I again wondered about what was going to happen that day.

Arriving in Seattle, I felt bleary and a bleugh, something I attributed to the early morning start and the eight hour travel time. As I stumbled out of the gate, I suddenly realised I had no way of recognising Alice. The description Jasper had given all those years ago was that his sister was ‘tiny, pixie-like, with spiky black hair, and too much energy.’ In the fifteen years since seeing him, I doubted that the tiny part of his description had changed, but was unsure about the hair or energy.

I shouldn’t have worried.
As I stepped through the gate, a figure broke away from the waiting crowd, and barreled into me. She wrapped me in a hug, and for once in my life, I felt tall. I stood a comfortable five six, but the woman hugging me wouldn’t have even cleared five feet. She later told me she was a proud four ten in flats. She no longer had the spiky black hair, instead opting for a more natural brunette colour, with waves that fell to just above her shoulders.

Unused to this, or any, sort of physical relationships with strangers, I stood awkwardly, one arm wrapped around Alice as she continued to hug me. After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only a few seconds, she pulled away, leaning back to look up at me. It stuck me that she and Jasper must look absurd standing next to each other. That she must look like a child compared to his height. Before I had a chance to gather my thoughts any further, she started talking. Faster than anyone I had ever met. The speed and the southern twang so like her brother’s were incongruous, and I assumed that she was being fueled by caffeine or sugar. I had never heard anyone from the south talk so fast. I later learnt that this was simply Alice. She didn’t slow down all day, and I didn’t see her consume any caffeine, or large quantities of sugar.

“Hi, I’m Alice. And you must be Lilly. Can I call you Lilly? I mean, I know we have only just met, but I feel like I already know you. You were all my brother could talk about, for months after that tour. You are gorgeous! I can see why Jasper was so taken with you. And, I think that life, age, motherhood, agrees with you. You look amazing.”

By this stage, she had taken my by the arm, and was dragging me through the airport terminal. Despite her tiny stature, or maybe because of my state of shock, I was having difficulties keeping up with her.

“So, I have a whole day planned for us. I know that you must be exhausted from your flight, and probably starving. I know the food is better in first class, but I still find it’s gross plane food. So, I thought we could start at a restaurant, then head to a spa for some relaxation? Don’t worry, it’ll all be very low profile. And if the media does get wind of things, you will be linked to me, not Jasper. And my profile, my star rating is so much lower than his. I rarely get followed anywhere. Despite making so many stars and films look so good. But being Jasper’s sister has raised my profile a bit recently.”

I honestly had no idea what she was talking about. It wasn’t until later I realised that the profile she was talking about was how much the media paid attention to them, their fame.

“So, what sort of food would you like? If I don’t know a good place we can go, then I know people who will. Get in.”

We had arrived at her car, and it was beautiful. I don’t know much about cars, but this was a beautiful classic. The convertible roof seemed a bit impractical for Seattle weather, but the look of
the car suited the exuberant woman in front of me. The pink was perfectly suited to her energy, her vitality, and her happiness.

“Isn’t it pretty? It’s my baby. My dad and I restored it, before the accident. She only comes out on special occasions now, and you seemed like a special occasion. And today is going to be a beautiful day. Food preferences?”

I said the first thing that came to mind, thanking my luck that it was something I actually ate. “Sushi?”

“Perfect. I know the best little sushi bar, run the traditional Japanese way. I’m sure that they speak English, but it’s more fun to be yelled at in Japanese, don’t you think?” We had climbed into the car, and Alice was exiting the car park. As she hit the clear roads, she picked up the pace. I was terrified. Alice, it seemed, liked to drive fast. I felt the need to cling to my seat, and closed my eyes, protecting myself from the images that were flashing past quicker than I felt was safe.

“Umm… yes… being yelled at in Japanese… best way to eat sushi.”

“I know, right? Well, we should be there soon. And don’t worry about anything today, it is all my treat.”

Nodding, I tightened my grip on the seats. Alice’s driving didn’t seem to get any less frightening the longer I was in the car. In fact, it almost got more scary.

I was so relieved when we arrived at this sushi bar. True to her word, the sushi was amazing, and the experience of being yelled at in Japanese did make me feel like I was back in Japan. I ordered and ate slowly, as Alice continued to chatter away. About halfway through the meal, she turned to me, as if she suddenly realised that she was monopolising the conversation.

“Oh, my god! I’m totally doing all the talking. You must be so confused. I mean, you’ve never met me before, and here I am talking your ear off.”

“That’s okay, Alice. I think that you are a bit more of a talker than I am. But I am a bit confused. Why am I meeting you? Does Jasper not want to see me? Because that is fine. He just needed to send an email telling me so. I mean, Isa and I have done just fine for ourselves for the last fourteen years. We can keep doing it. I just though he would want to know….” I trailed off, not sure what else to say to this bubbly woman in front of me.
“Silly girl! Of course my brother wants to meet you. But, sadly, he is in Europe for the next two months. The film distributors are really pushing the promotion of Drawing of Three. They want it to move past the cult status Gunslinger got. So, Jasper is currently in Munich. Berlin tomorrow. He never has more than two days off in a row, and none of them gave him enough time to fly back to meet with you in person. He desperately wants to. And he couldn’t face not starting the communication until he gets back to the states.

“He spent the year after the tour you two did pining over you, you know. He tried to hide it from me, but I knew. He kept kicking himself that he didn’t ask for your name, for an email address or facebook or anything. From the sounds of things, you both decided that. He even rang the tour company, about four months after the tour, when it occurred to him that they would have your name. But like you, they wouldn’t give it to him. He did authorise his name to be given to you, but I guess you had already tried that route by then.

“He’s still single, you know. There have been a few girlfriends over the last few years, but none of them lasted long. He claims that none of them were right, that none of them were ‘the one,’ but I think it’s more than that. I think that he never really got over you, that he never really stopped believing that somehow your lives and paths would cross again.

“Not that he would ever admit to that.

“So, he didn’t want to miss this opportunity. He asked me to start things off, to open up lines of communication. And, he almost fired Victoria. She told him about your letter as a joke, expecting him to laugh at the crazy fan who had been so sure that she knew him years ago she had included her child’s DNA profile. Jasper was furious that she was making a joke about it, especially when Victoria told him the name of the person who sent the letter. My brother doesn’t get angry easily, but when he does, it is frightening.

“Once he was done yelling at Victoria, he rang me, asking me to pick the letter up for him. He was almost in tears, Lilly. While I’m sure he is still in shock that he is a father, I don’t think he had ever expected to hear from you again. And I think part of him always wanted to see you again. So, I think that the tears were in relief that he suddenly had a way to contact you.

“He wants to get to know is daughter. If she wants to know him. And he wants to see you again. He understands that you probably have a life, friends, relationships, have moved on since you knew him, but he wants to be part of your lives. He is kicking himself that he can’t be here, that he has to finish out the commitments his contract forces him into.

“The photograph was enough to convince him that Isadora is his daughter. She has so much of him
in her, doesn’t she? She looks a bit like our grandmother did at that age. But, Victoria, thinking as his agent, something he really didn’t want when he heard about you, made him have the paternity tested. He’s a match. Which, of course, you already knew.”

She paused, drawing breath. Motioning to someone behind me, she continued when more drinks arrived on our table. Reaching into the messenger bag slung over her chair, she pulled out a navy, leather notebook.

“I gave this to Jasper a week after he got back from that tour you both did. He wasn’t really talking to me then, blaming me for things beyond my control. Blaming me for sending him on that trip, and meeting you. We had just moved from Texas to Washington, so he didn’t really have any friends yet, didn’t have a support network here yet. Not that he really had one outside of me in Texas, but whatever. I gave him this book.

“I told him to write the important parts of his life in it. That the book wasn’t for him, but for someone else. And that he would know who that person was when he met them. I always had suspicions that your paths would cross again, I just didn’t know when. I’m glad it was now. I mean, this is so much better than finding each other when you’re all old and wrinkly, right? Well, anyway, the book was never meant for him, he just needed to keep it. To record the important parts of his life. When he got your letter, he knew who the book was for.

“He wants you to give this to Isadora. He wants his daughter to know him. He wants to be part of your lives. He can’t be there with you both at the moment, but as soon as his commitments finish, as soon as the promotional touring stops, he is going to come to see you in Providence. If you want him to. He really doesn’t want to do anything without your consent.

“There is a letter for you in the front of the notebook. He asked me to give it to you, and for you to read it when you get back home.”

I was speechless. I had never expected him to want to launch into our lives so soon. I had expected him to have moved on. To be happily in a committed relationship, to not want anything to do with you, my darling girl.

My time with Alice was so short that day, that I knew what I had to do.

“Alice, thank you. Do you think he’d mind if I read this before I gave it to Isadora?” I motioned to the book, and Alice shook her head. I reached for my bag, and pulled out a photo album.
Taking a deep breath of relief, I passed her the album before I continued. “Good. Can you please give him this? I had always hoped that I would find him again, but had almost resigned myself to the fact that I wouldn’t. I didn’t even realise that you guys didn’t live in Texas any more. The only lead I had was that I was looking for Jasper from Texas, who was eighteen and lived with his sister, and about to start college. Not exactly the way to find someone.

“This book is Isadora’s life so far. I have been making three copies of this since she was born. One for me, one for her, and one for Jasper. I never thought I would get a chance to see him again, but always hoped I would. Each photo has a story or special meaning for me. I have been compiling it since Isadora was born. The DVD has a short movie on it. Once I found out I was pregnant, I took a photo of myself every day. I continued to do this after Isa was born, taking photos of her every day for the first two years of her life. They have been stitched together into a movie, showing my body growing, my belly increasing in size. And then, it shows Isa growing, changing day by day.

“You have my phone number. Please let him know that he can ring any time he wants. Except when I’m asleep, I tend to be a bit cranky then. I don’t start my new job for another month, so I am pretty much free during all day until I start. I’d love to hear from him. But, I understand that he is busy.”

Smiling, Alice assured me that she would let him know.

“Nothing would make me happier at the moment than you and my brother becoming friends. Now, are you done? Do you want anything more to eat?”

Assuring her that I was full, sated, Alice got up and we left. I don’t know how she had done it, but somehow she had managed to pay without me noticing.

As she pulled me back to her car, she started talking about what we were going to do for the rest of the day. “I thought you may not have had much you time in the last decade and a half. So, I have arranged a spa day for us. Do you mind? And, do you mind if I bring a few of my friends along? They will love you.”

Alice talked and acted so much faster than I was used to. Nodding numbly, I agreed to meet her friends, to go to the spa with her. She was right that I hadn’t really had any me time since you were born, but I don’t mind. You are worth it, my darling girl.

Once more, the car ride was frightening. Opening my eyes when Alice switched off the engine, I realised that we were at one of the most up market day spas I had ever encountered.
“Alice, I can’t afford this. I can’t let you pay for this. It’s too much.”

“Don’t be silly,” she replied. “You are the mother of my niece. I have missed the last fifteen years of your life. I am a highly successful film costume designer. My annual salary averages at least six figures, usually seven or eight. Please, let me spend this on you. I think my life has been a bit easier than yours. It is the least I can do for you. Plus, I want to. You can’t deny me that, can you?”

Sighing, I agreed to let her pay.

As we walked in, I noticed the group of women sitting in the foyer. A brunette about my height, with huge doe eyes got up first walking to Alice. I blushed as the woman kissed Alice’s lips, the passion of their love clearly emanating.

“Bella, this is Lillian. She’s the mother of Jasper’s daughter. Lilly, this is my wife, Bella.” Alice gestured to the other women seated in the foyer. “The blonde is Rosalie, the motherly looking woman waving is Esme, and the girl in glasses is Angela. Esme was my boss when Jasper and I first moved to Seattle, and Rosalie is her daughter. Angela is a screenwriter, she and her husband Ben wrote the script for the Gunslinger movies and Esme and I’ve done costumes for those and several of her other films. And, they are all family to me and Jasper.”

All the women waved, greeting me warmly. We were ushered into the spa, and before I knew it, I was being massaged, pummeled and polished. The massage was amazing. My body felt more relaxed than it had in years, and I really didn’t want to get off the table. Eventually, I was coaxed off, and out into the damp Seattle air. Esme took pity on me, and ushered Bella into Alice’s car, taking me in hers instead.

My darling girl, I think I spent most of my time in Seattle eating. We went to dinner before my flight home, and I began to feel more relaxed around these women. They were lovely, friendly, and welcoming. I slowly began to learn about these women who had become such a big part of Jasper’s life, the women who were part of his family. They all insisted on exchanging contact information with me, of keeping in touch when I returned to Providence. All too soon it seemed, it was time to be driven to the airport. Once again, Alice drove, at the same horrifying speeds she had used for the rest of the day.

The flight home was better than I expected for a red-eye. Probably because the first class seats were so much more comfortable than economy seats. Despite this, I was exhausted when I got home. After checking on you, I went straight to bed. Knowing I could only sleep for a few hours without totally throwing off my body clock, I set my alarm to go off at midday. Waking up feeling slightly refreshed, I went in search of you, went to tell you all about your aunt.
It wasn’t until later than night that I remembered about the notebook I had been given to pass onto you, about the letter than Jasper had included for me.

Climbing into bed, ready for sleep, I pulled the letter out, and saw your father’s handwriting for the first time. Settling back into my pillows, I began to read.

Dear Lilly.

I don’t think I can begin to describe the shock I felt when Victoria told me about your letter. I have spent the last fifteen years kicking myself for not getting your contact details after the tour. It has to be the stupidest thing I have ever done.

I am so glad that you contacted me. I am so glad that I have a chance to get to know you again. Because you are still the most amazing person I have ever met. You have to believe me when I say that.

My contract keeps me in Europe for the next two months. I wish I was able to come home, but I can’t. So, instead, I send my sister in my place. I know she can be a bit hyper, but she loves me. I know she will love you too. And if she drives too fast, just tell her to slow down. She (usually) listens.

At Victoria’s insistence, I had had my DNA profile done, and compared to Isadora’s. We are a match. Not that I ever doubted that. Isadora is beautiful, just like you, and she has so much of our family in her. I know that it could just be wishful thinking, but I know that I see my family in her. She can’t be anyone’s child but mine. And she looks like she has so much of you in her. And if, as you say, she has graduated high school, is valedictorian, is starting college, at an Ivy no less, she must be as amazing as you were when I met you. As amazing as I am sure you still are.

I want to get to know Isadora, to get to know you again. I understand if you don’t want to have anything to do with me, but I want to be part of your life. To have the opportunity to know the two of you.

I don’t presume to know how your life was. My life was easy. I was provided for. My parents left my sister and I enough money to live comfortably. I have no idea what your life was like after Isadora was born, and if it was hard, I am truly sorry for that.
If there is anything that I can do now, please let me know. I know it is a fairly empty offer, considering that Isadora is about to start college on a full scholarship, and you have a job at the university, at Brown no less.

Please, can I contact you?

Yours,

Jasper.

My gorgeous baby girl, I was in tears by the time I finished reading Jasper’s letter. I put it aside, and started reading the notebook. I slowly read the pages, read through the things he had done in the years since I last saw him. By the time I finished, it was well after midnight. I felt blessed to have been given a second opportunity to get to know Jasper.

I felt even more blessed that you were being given the opportunity to get to know your father.

My darling girl, it was reading Jasper’s notebook that inspired me to write this. My life was, as he thought, very different to his. It was hard at parts. I know you are aware of most of the story, but I think you needed to hear all of it. Because, for much of the early years of your life, you were unaware of what was going on around. And, I know that past your faree tale, I have never really told you why you don’t have contact with your grandparents, so many of the small details of our lives.

You have always said that the faree tale was enough for you, but I think I owe you more. I owe you the full truth. So, I have written this for you. It has kept me hidden away in my room for the last week, coming out of seclusion only to eat. I apologise for my behaviour the last week, but I needed to do this. I needed to do this for you.

The story is unfinished. I have filled this book, and have told you everything I can about your life so far. You start college in a barely a month, and I start my new job tomorrow.

My darling, I have read your father’s notebook. His life played out so differently to mine, and yet our paths have once more crossed. Please, read about his life. It is, and always will be, your decision as to whether or not you have a relationship with him. You choose, it is your life to live.
And, as you live it, please fill the olive notebook.

My darling girl, you will have an amazing life. Never forget that, never let anyone tell you anything else. You can do anything you want to, anything you put your mind to.

And so, I tell you once more, my darling girl, I love you. You are the centre of my world, and I will always love you.

Your loving mother,

Lillian Delphine Haig

xoxo
Lily and Jasper have reconnected! Alice is back! And the first notebook is done....

Lise closed the book and put it down contemplatively. She’d been sitting leaning awkwardly against the trunk for longer than she had planned. She’d just wanted to leaf through the book, but it was so compelling.

Plus, two of the people had her names. Well, some of them. Her full name was Lillian Isadora Sibohan Esme White. But she’d always been called Lise. When she was 13, she’d been so angry at her parents for giving her such weird, old fashioned names. No one was called Lillian. She’d met one in her entire life, and the woman was old. In her nineties old. So, it was a small miracle that her parents had seen reason when she was little and called her Lise instead. But still... the coincidence was too big for these people not to be relatives of hers. She knew she was named for grandmothers many generations past. She just couldn’t remember how far back they were.

She knew the book was old. But, as she carefully flicked through the pages, she had no way of telling just how old the book really was. She didn’t want to ask her great-grandfather. He was probably still really cranky, sitting on the porch glowering.

Lise, feeling impatient, wanted to know exactly when Lilly was writing. It all sounded old to her, but Lilly’s use of the word ‘skirts’ really confused her. The word always conjured up images of ladies in big crinolines, those things that she had seen at museums with school a couple of times, that were worn in like, the eighteenth century or something.

But, the casual mention of condoms made her thing that maybe, probably the book was written more recently. Thanks to the very thorough sex education classes Lise had taken in middle school, she knew that rubber condoms started being used in eighteen hundred and something. 1840, maybe? But, they weren’t really accepted and commonly used until later than that. Lilly made it seem so normal to be grabbing a condom, that Lise assumed the book was written at least in the 1980s, if not later. But, without the dates, she was frustrated that she couldn’t tell exactly.

The handwriting wasn’t cursive, so she guessed she could probably rule out anything before… the 1990s? Fun history fact number 142. Cursive handwriting fell out of favour with the rise of the personal computer over the 1990s and 2000s, and handwriting was a under-used skill from the mid 2010s onwards. There was a resurgence of handwriting in the 2030s. So… well, that gave her a 40 year window of time. Not close enough.
Looking back at the stack of books, she picked up the next book. Opening the cover, she flicked past the title page, smiling at the inscription:

“To Jasper.

Fill this with your thoughts, the important parts of your life. Eventually, you will figure out who this book is destined for, and will pass it on to them.

Love forever,

Alice. xoxo”

The words were clearly written with love, and made Lise smile. Whoever had passed on the book – this Alice – clearly loved Jasper. Lise wasn’t totally sure how she knew this, with such a brief written message to base her opinion on, but at the same time, she knew it was true.

Clearly, this book was written by Jasper, the guy that Lilly had slept with. Lise shook her head, giggling at the way that she was starting to try to go all detective on the books. She already knew that the book was written by Jasper. Lilly’s letter had told her that already. But, the inscription confirmed it in her mind or something. Shaking her head to clear it, Lise looked back at the book in her hands. She wondered if Jasper would be as… descriptive… about his exploits with Lilly. Or if he’d mention them at all.

Leafing through the book, Lise was thrilled to see dates scattered throughout the writing.

Looking around the dusty attic, she spied what might be an armchair, covered in a dust cloth. The leg looked very similar to something one of her best friends had. Putting the book down, she wandered over to the potentially-an-armchair, and lifted the dust cloth.

Carefully folding the heavy fabric, she smiled at the chair that had been uncovered. It looked comfortable, worn in all the right places, and perfect for curling up in to read the books. It was covered in a faded peacock feather design. It looked loved, and well used. Lise tentatively prodded the seat, checking that the springs were still intact. It would be just her luck if the chair was stashed up here because the springs had given way and you fell through the seat if you dared to sit on in.

Thankfully, the seat seemed firm, and she risked sitting on it. The springs held, supporting her. Smiling, she realised the chair was a comfortable as she had guessed it was.
Getting up, Lise collected the stack of remaining books, carefully carrying them back to the chair. She made herself comfortable, fidgeting a bit until she thought that she would be able to sit there for several hours without moving.

Picking up the navy leather book, Lise opened the cover, and turned past the inscription. Making her final adjustment, she started reading the second book.
I don’t know why I’m doing this. Except that Alice told me to. And there is one thing that I’ve learnt in life, and that is to listen to my pixie of a sister.

So, I sit here, following her instructions, writing in this book for god knows what reason, blindly believing that she will not lead me astray.

Blindly following her advice. “Jasper, you need to write about the important parts of your life. This book will be important one day. One day, you will know exactly who you were writing it for, and you will just know that it is the write time to give it to them. This book isn’t for you, it’s for them.”

A sentiment she reiterated in the inscription she put at the front of this book.

Damn cryptic pixie and her all knowing ways.

But, I learnt long ago not to bet against Alice, so I’ll take her advice, and write the important parts of my life down.

I guess, since this book isn’t meant for me, I should introduce myself to the reader. Whoever that might be.

My name is Jasper Brandon Whitlock. I am 18 years old, and I live with my older sister, Mary-Alice Brandon Whitlock. Or, as she has insisted that she be called since reading Alice in Wonderland and Through The Looking Glass, Alice. Alice is my best friend, my big sister, my guardian.
Just two years my senior, Alice has been looking after me for years. Or more precisely, she looked out for me until I was almost sixteen, and has been looking after me for the last two years.

Ever since, two and a half years ago, our parents died in a car crash, leaving us parentless, and without legal guardians.

Just three months shy of her eighteenth birthday, Alice petitioned that she be appointed my legal guardian. It took her almost a month to convince the courts, but she was happy to stretch the process out until her birthday if she needed to.

We grieved together, and slowly, we discovered that life went on. That we were still alive, still here, and that while our world had stopped, the world around us hadn’t. Slowly, we eased ourselves back into normal life, although, there are times that I question what is so normal about it. How can life be normal, when you have had to bury your parents, in the prime of their lives? How can life be normal when the drunk driver that hit them could walk from his car with only minor scratches, while they died instantly?

Alice and I inherited everything. The house, the cars, the land we camped on every summer. Our parents had been successful, and lucky, and they had no mortgages, no outstanding taxes, and healthy bank balances.

Alice and I talked, slowly trying to figure out our lives, trying to put the pieces back together. She had just graduated high school, and I was due to start my junior year when the school year started in September. Both of us knew that our parent’s house was a place of grief for us, but that moving would be even harder. So, we stayed in the house, waiting for my high school years to end, waiting until we could move on, find a new place for ourselves.

As the screaming roaring pain of our parents death settled back into a dull roar, the grief lessened but still there, I began to notice that girls had suddenly become interested in me. They would bat their eyelids, sit close to me in class, subtle ways of showing their interest that I had somehow ignored the past year.

Most of these girls were not my type, and I carefully, trying to be a gentleman, let them down. A few were my type, and I decided to see where it would go. I was so new at all this, girls not yet really something I was aware of before my parent’s death, that now, as I stepped out of my fog, I wasn’t sure how to act, what to do around them. Some got huffy and left, others carefully guided me. Maria, not my first, but the first I really liked, slowly taught me what she liked, how to make her breath hitch in her throat, how to make her gasp my name in ecstasy.
Half way through our senior year, Maria suddenly moved to Mexico, her father having gotten a lucrative job. I was sad to see her go, but knew I would get over it. There were a few girls after that, and Maria proved to be a good teacher. I paid attention to the girls needs before my own, and they would scream my name, let me in, in ways I am sure my classmates never achieved. They were all lovely, and the sex was good with some of them, but I knew I was in a holding pattern, waiting for the next stage of my life to start.

While I finished my schooling, Alice sewed. She had always been creative, artistic, good with her hands, but she approached her projects with a new fervor. She poured her grief into them I think, using the detail and time, the constant occupation of her hands and mind as a distraction to help her move forward.

It was during my senior year that she got noticed, and was enticed to come to Seattle. She had been selling her pieces at a small boutique in downtown Houston, and had a small, but growing, faithful fan base. Word clearly spread, and she was contacted by Esme, a film costume designer, to come to Seattle to work with her company, In Love Designs, on a period drama during the summer. While she was only being employed over the summer, the Esme made it clear that if her work was of a good enough quality, if her work ethic was compatible with the company, there was the possibility of a permanent contract.

Alice was thrilled with the possibility of the job. It turned out that she had heard of Esme’s company, and it was on her top-five-places-she-wanted-to-work list. I was applying for colleges, but hadn’t really found anything that clicked with me. I was a bit lost about what I wanted to do with my life, so applied to the University of Washington, knowing that if Alice’s job got extended then we would be in the same city.

My grades had always been good, and I graduated with a 3.9 GPA, and acceptance into UW. Both Alice and I knew we needed a change of scenery, to be away from the places that had so many memories for us. I accepted my offer for UW, and Alice figured that even if she didn’t get a permanent contract with In Love Designs she would be able to get work elsewhere in Seattle.

So, a week after my graduation, we packed up the house, putting most of our personal stuff and items with particular meaning to us into storage, packed our car and drove the 2,621 miles from Galveston to Seattle. We made a trip of it, taking almost ten days to make the drive. I knew that I would miss the ocean, mere minutes walk from my house, the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, but didn’t want to deny my sister the opportunity she had been given. And neither of us wanted to be separated.

Without a mortgage on our parents house, we were free to do whatever we wanted with it. Unable to part with it, we decided to rent it out. We left most of the furniture, the pieces that held little or no sentimental value to us, listing the house as ‘semi-furnished,’ knowing this would generate a greater rental price. We figure that, combined with the rental on the other properties our parents
had left us, the revenue it generated would be enough to cover our rent and utilities in Seattle, with a bit left over for a rainy day.

Our parents had set up generous college funds for each of us. Although Alice had worked over the past few years, we had been comfortable, living off the interest from our parents’ life insurance. Her college fund remained untouched, and mine was more than enough to cover my tuition, books and a bit have a bit on the side.

So, really, finances were not a concern for us. I don’t have to get student loans, scholarships, or even find a job while I am at school.

It took us a week to find an apartment that we had liked in Seattle. We spent that time in a swanky hotel, spending money unnecessarily, needing the holiday it offered us. We had only taken one car up to Seattle, preferring to share the driving for the trip. Deciding we would look for a second car when we arrived, if we needed one, we sold the other cars in our collection. I was happy enough without a car, so Alice had taken her baby up.

Alice loved cars, seeing them as an extension of her accessories. When she was fourteen, she had found her car, a 1959 Cadillac Convertible in Elvis Pink, and persuaded our parents to buy it and help her restore it. It had been in a bad way, but under her loving hand (and the skilled hands of the mechanics) the car slowly became a valuable collectors item.

The only downside of her car was its limited storage capacity. We had already put most of our larger belongings into storage, so didn’t need to worry about transporting them. A friend of Alice’s would send the rest of our bags when we had an address.

Of course, it was Alice who found us the perfect apartment, within our budget, with great amenities, close to both her work and my university. I would have expected no less of her, but I was still surprised at how easy our transition from Galveston to Seattle was. Alice knew that she didn’t want to go to university, and our parents hadn’t put any stipulations on how we used our college funds. So, Alice bought our apartment outright, and suddenly, we were property owners in multiple cities. She put the rent from the Texas house into a closed bank account, letting it collect interest. She said that when it got to be enough, we would buy a second apartment. Or something. She had a gleam in her eyes that meant she knew something that she didn’t think needed to be told yet, that hint of a secret that I had learned years earlier to leave alone. She would tell me in due course, when she thought it was necessary. Alice sourced everything we needed for the apartment, and honestly, I was happy to let her shop. While she loves the challenge and thrill of going from one store to another, finding what she deems the ‘perfect’ whatever, I have never understood the thrill.

And so, less than a fortnight after arriving in Seattle, we were settled into a fully furnished apartment that we owned, and beginning our new lives.
September 2, 2007

Alice is to blame for all of this of course. Once we were settled, before I went back to university, she encouraged me to travel. To go on a trip around the New England / Canadian border area.

I blame her entirely.

I went on the trip, partly because the area intrigues me, partly because I just wanted Alice to stop hounding me. Honestly, you’d think the girl had an ulterior motive for getting me out of the house.

But no, I listened to her, because she is my sister, and because she has never really steered me wrong before. Because I trust her. So stupid!

Because, over the course of the tour, I had not only the most amazing, important, life changing experience, but also because I screwed it up. I fucked up so badly I don’t even know how to deal, how to go back to the life I was in.

Because, on the tour I met her.

Lilly.

Christ, I don’t even know her last name. I don’t know which of us decided that was a good idea, but somehow we decided that because it was just for the tour, because she was about to head to England and I was going home, we wouldn’t exchange surnames, emails, phone numbers, anything. Christ, I don't even know if she knows I'm going home to Seattle, not to Texas.
We would let our time together be anonymous.

See what I mean? Stupid.

And I blame Alice for it all, for encouraging me to go on the trip, for my spinelessness, for not being there to make me get Lilly’s information.

GAH!!

The worst thing, though, is that I know it isn’t Alice’s fault. That my sister is not the one to blame for my current predicament. Because I am, for all intensive purposes, a fully functioning adult. I can vote, I can have sex, I can buy guns and knives and in Quebec, I can even drink.

So why am I incapable of asking for a girl’s phone number? Or, even, why was I such a fool, and a wimp, and didn’t ask for her surname?

Because, she, Lilly, is amazing.

I had always thought that my grades were good, that I was intelligent, but she puts me to shame. And she is so humble about it! I mean, the girl isn’t even eighteen yet, and she is already two and a half years through her degree.

She is amazing, and intelligent, and beautiful, and interesting, and I just wanted to talk to her, all the time, but she is a vixen, and I think I’m in love with her.

And I let her walk away from me.

I’m so stupid.

September 3, 2007
I realize that my previous entry is probably a bit difficult to follow. So, to whoever reads this, I will go through my tour a big more… logically.

Before I was due to start university, and while she was working, Alice convinced me to take a ten day tour of New England and Canada. The area has always interested me, so I figured it would be a good chance to go visit it, before I started my studies, before I had too many commitments tying me to Seattle. I knew I was cutting the timing close, starting my classes just two days after the tour ended.

So, I went on the tour. We were visiting Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Boston, Ithaca, and Niagara before returning to Toronto. I had decided against anything that was even remotely like a Contiki tour, preferring not to spend my nights drinking and my days comatose on a bus. Instead, I went for a smaller company, one that sounded like the focus was more on the sights than the night life. After all, there would only be one stop on the itinerary where I was able to drink, anyway. So, the party tour just didn’t really work for me.

The brochure sounded good, and I looked forward to my trip. I arrived in Toronto a few days early, and went sightseeing in the city. While it was both the start and end point of the tour, it was not included. Toronto had a strange feeling to me. I found it very hard to get any sort of vibe from the areas I visited, although the waterfront was beautiful. Although, the water was the wrong colour. I guess that I have been spoilt, living in Galveston for so long.

When the tour started, I was instantly entranced by one of the girls on the trip. She seemed to be traveling alone, sitting on the bus with her headphones on, drowning the world out. I ached to go and speak to her. I sat in the seats across the isle from this mysterious girl, and when she looked up at me, making eye contact for the first time, I knew that might be my only chance.

So, I gathered up all the courage I had, and moved to sit next to her.

I can’t even remember what we talked about. I must have introduced myself, and she must have done the same, because by the time we arrived in Ottawa, I knew her name. I knew so much about her. She was so easy to talk to, and we had so many compatible interests. I was surprised when we arrived in Ottawa. The time had seemed to drift away, and I hadn’t noticed the bus moving across the country, hadn’t noticed anything really, except her.

We left the bus, and continued talking, following our tour guide around the city, sitting next to each other at dinner, parting late that evening to sleep, with promises to meet each other in the foyer in the morning to get breakfast. I almost couldn’t walk away from her that first night.
She was beautiful, her looks flawless and effortless. She didn’t wear make up, but her skin was smooth, even and beautiful. She was lightly tanned, from the time she had just spent in Japan, she said. She didn’t seem to worry about what other people thought, dressing simply in a skirt and T-shirt, claiming that she didn’t like pants, and wanted to hold onto as much of summer as she could. When she got to England, she told me, it was unlikely that she would see much sun.

Her hair, which she had worn loose on the bus and pulled into a ponytail for the walking tour, was long, dark, and straight. It fell to her waist, and shone in the sun. Somehow, it looked almost black on the bus, but as soon as it caught the rays of sunshine, became the most beautiful red I have ever seen. I wanted to run my fingers through its length, wanted to feel the silky texture I could just see in its shine.

I wanted to touch, caress, love this girl I had just met.

But even more so, I wanted to curl up in her amazing mind. I knew that she was downplaying her own intelligence, but it was impossible to hide. She told me that she was half way through her degree, that she was still only seventeen, that she had graduated early and went straight to university.

She was so intelligent, witty, amazing, I wanted to curl up with her, absorb her brilliance, never part with her.

And yet, I managed to tear myself away that first night. It has to be the one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.

That first night, I went to my shared room and dreamt of her. The year after the death of my parents had basically stopped my dating life. While both Alice and I knew that we should be living life to the fullest, that our parents wouldn’t want us sequestering ourselves away, it was sometimes hard. Despite my relationship with Maria, and with the other girls I had slept with, I hadn’t really ever dated. In some ways, my grief and then my knowledge that we were moving after my senior year had stopped me even seeing girls as something to get attached to. So, when I dreamt of her, I knew that she was something special.

When we met for breakfast the next day, I was struck again by her beauty, her radiance, her soul. We walked to the bakery near our hotel, and over coffee (on my part) hot chocolate (on her part) and pastries, we had fallen back into the easy conversation we had shared the night before. Talking to her was so easy, that I barely noticed where we went that day. I wouldn’t have noticed, if she didn’t keep drawing my attention to the buildings, the canal, the sights of Ottawa.
Every time she opened her mouth, my heart did a little backflip. Her accent, subtle among the crass American ones surrounding us, was enthralling. I laughed at her refusal to say certain words, claiming that they got confused on her tongue, refusing to sound correctly. Words like pianist (she insisted on referring to them as piano players). She claimed her accent was lazy, that she dropped letters, (which is true. She would say things like tha’ rather than that), that her accent couldn’t possibly be sexy. That it was the accent of a drunk foundling nation. And yet, I disagreed. It was sexy, and I was enthralled.

She was unbelievably sexy, and as I flirted with her, I could barely hide my surprise when she started flirting back. How could this amazing, beautiful, self confident, wonderful person be interested in me?

The day passed easily, too quickly for my liking, and soon it was dinner time. We again ate with the group, in the prearranged restaurant. After dinner, we walked along the canal, and was amazed by the clear sky. Ottawa may not be as big a city as New York, or Houston, but it is big. So, when the sky cleared, I was shocked to see the stars shining above us, bright and beautiful.

She commented just how different it was to look up to this sky, and not be able to see any of the stars she was familiar with. She kept expecting the souther cross to jump out from behind some clouds, the sky to resolve itself into something familiar, but it just didn’t.

Moving to stand behind her, I started to point out the stars I recognised in the sky. I pointed out Ursa Major and Minor, Pegasus, (which she excitedly recognised), Cassiopeia and Hercules, Bootes and Cygnus. As I was pointing them out, I felt her slowly press her body into mine, slowly closing the gap that we had carefully maintained all day.

That was all the encouragement I needed. I lowered myself to her height, remembering the back injury she had told me about. Unnecessary arching probably wouldn’t help it much. And with my almost six foot frame and her five six frame, she would have to arch her back a lot to meet my kiss.

I slowly, tenderly kissed her lips, turning her in my arms so we were facing each other, the passion in our kisses growing by the second. As she wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me closer, almost hungrily, I knew we needed to get back to the hotel. Our tour group had an uneven number of people in it, and she had been lucky enough to get a single room. We barely broke apart the entire walk back, and I honestly don’t know how we managed it.

As we got to the hotel, and into her room, I steered her towards the bed, tugging at her clothes, desperate to remove the barriers between our flesh. She pulled at mine, fumbling with my belt buckle, pulling my pants and boxers past my now very hard dick.
She reached out, and my dick twitched in anticipation, just as I managed to get her skirts down past her hips, letting them fall to the floor. I had already dealt with her top and bra, and her underwear came away easily with the layers of skirts she was wearing.

I stepped back, my eyes traveling across her body, trying to absorb every detail of her beauty. I wasn’t a virgin, but my experience was limited at best. Despite this, I knew she was the most beautiful, gorgeous, sexy, voluptuous, amazing woman who had ever given me the pleasure of seeing her naked. It was an honor, and I wanted to ravish, cherish, worship her body.

She stepped forward, her cheeks reddening slightly with embarrassment, and kissed me deeply. I felt her tense, and she jumped, wrapping her legs around my waist and sliding her body against my stomach. As she slid into a stable position, she rubbed her slit against my hard dick, and I felt just how wet she was. Just how turned on she was. Just how turned on she was by me.

I couldn’t help but smile at this amazing creature who wanted to share her bed with me. Cupping her ass to support her weight, I slowly walked towards her bed, lowing her body so she lay on the bed, with her ass almost hanging off the edge. Trailing kisses over her body, I worshipped her body, kissing spots I knew were sensitive, erotic, until I reached the one spot that would make her scream.

Carefully, I brushed my fingers lightly over her clit, watching as she reacted to the contact, arching her back and moaning with pleasure. Her legs fell open, giving me full view of her beauty, of her wet slit ready and waiting to be worshipped. Teasing her with kisses, I continued to kiss erogenous area - her abdomen, inner thighs, running my fingers lightly through her pubic hair, listening to her breath become faster, and seeing her chest rise and fall with the deep breaths she was taking. I carefully placed her feet on my shoulders, kissing her clit. She tasted amazing, her taste matching her smell, slightly sweet, slightly salty, slightly musky, perfectly her. I continued to kiss her clit, running my tongue up her length, dipping it into her vagina, reveling in the taste of the amazing woman spread in front of me. She pressed her hips into my mouth, and I responded, sucking her clit harder, teasing it with my tongue. She screamed, her pleasure making her words come out garbled and unintelligible. I could feel her coming close to climax, and slowly slipped two fingers inside her, kissing sucking and licking her clit at the same time.

As I did so, I was quietly trying to asses the size of her vagina, trying to figure out what position would work for sex if we got there tonight. I am well hung, as they say, and know that if I am not careful, I can hurt the girl I’m with, just because of my size. There are a few positions that make it better, and I needed to know if I would have to use them. Feeling her cervix, I knew she was smaller than I would fill. As I continued to lick and kiss, I knew I would have to take her on her side, or with her legs over her head.

I felt her tremble, and the walls of her vagina contract around my fingers, as she came, screaming my name.
I smiled, slowly extracting my fingers from inside her. As I moved her feet off my shoulders, I lazily brushed her clit, seeing the shudder of pleasure her sensitive organ caused.

Reaching below her, I lifted her form, moving it fully onto the bed, resting her head on the pillows. I had no doubt that she would be unable to use any of her leg muscles for the next few minutes.

I kissed her body, working my way from her stomach to her mouth, hoping to remove most of the taste of her flesh before I kissed her. I knew that the thought of tasting my own cum would gross me out, so I assumed that she would feel the same. I don’t know how well I accomplished my task, but when I kissed her, she sighed in satisfaction.

I hovered above her, afraid to rest so much of my weight on her body. I suddenly seemed so much bigger than, a hulk to her petite form. Looking into my eyes as I hovered there, she reached down, closing her hands firmly around my hardened dick. She started pumping, and I felt my breath hitch. The feeling of her hands on my dick was unimaginably pleasurable, amazing.

She let go, reaching behind me with one of her arms, hooking a leg around my torso. Before I knew what was happening, she had flipped us over, and was sitting firmly on my dick. She started moving, rubbing her wet slit along the length of my dick, teasing me as she reached the head, letting it linger at the opening of her vagina before once more sliding down my length.

As her breathing sped up, I realised that not only was she using her body to simulate me, my dick was grinding against her clit, and she was stimulating herself.

So, so hot.

But not as hot as what she did next.

She leant forward, swinging her hair out her face, and carefully ran her teeth over my shoulder, moving towards my neck. Pleading, I consented that I wanted her to do it.

To bite me.

As she bit down, I felt a spasm of pleasure shoot through me, continuing as she sucked and licked
the area between her teeth. She kissed along my collar bone, before lifting her body off mine, reaching over to her nightstand.

Before I could register what she was doing, she handed me a condom. Not the one I had in my wallet, but one she had pulled from her belongings somewhere. I could have been worried that she carried them with her, worried that she was only after a quick fuck, but I was turned on that she was taking control enough to initiate this.

“I need you inside me. And I need you to wear this.”

I took the condom, and rolled it on. She lay on her side, watching me, one hand under her head, the other lazily running across her stomach, breasts, down to her clit and back again. Knowing I would need a lot of lubrication to ease myself into her, I reached down to her wet slit, coating my hand with as much moisture as I could. Rubbing it onto my dick, I saw her eyes widen, and a soft purr of pleasure escape her lips.

She and I seemed to be on the same page, and once my dick was well covered, I rolled her easily onto her other side, her back towards me. As I flicked her clit, she gasped with pleasure, and grabbed my dick, easing it into her. Slowly, I pushed into her, careful not to push too hard on her cervix, an action guaranteed to cause her pain.

I shouldn’t have worried. I seemed to fill her perfectly, and gasped at the pleasure of having her on my dick. Reaching around her body, I began to finger her clit as I rocked, her body matching my rhythm. Soon, her toes were curling once more, and I felt the walls of her vagina tightening round my dick.

That was enough for me, and I began to shake, signaling my own orgasm was only seconds away. She cried my name once more, asking me to come with her, and that was enough, I climaxed, spent, screaming her name in pleasure and satisfaction.

Slowly, I withdrew from her, removing the condom and throwing it in the bin by her bed. We were checking out in the morning, so it would be cleared away then. She pulled me back towards her, holding me tight as she fell asleep. I kissed her hair, wishing her sweet dreams as I too fell into a deep, satisfied sleep.

When I awoke the next morning, I was greeted with the sight of Lilly massaging lotion onto her legs, then slowly dressing. Clearly remembering my hatred of early mornings, she offered me a shower in her bathroom, and to get me a coffee. She had clearly been up long enough to not only wake up, but to start to flirt. Hearing her words, I couldn’t help but flirt back, arranging another
date with her that night. I hoped it ended as well as this one had.

I knew I didn’t have long to shower and dress, so I stepped into the water just long enough to rinse the sweat of the night before’s exertions off my body.

I stepped out, dressing in the clothing I had worn the night before. I think I cursed, wanting to be able to put clean clothes on, but knowing that if I left Lilly’s room, I wouldn’t be able to get back in. Making a note to change before we got onto the bus, I sat down on the end of her bed.

Looking down, I spied a book poking out of her day bag. Intrigued, I pulled it out. I was shocked to see the author, having not picked her for a horror reader. Reading the blurb, the book sounded different to any Stephen King books I had ever read, and it intrigued me.

As I flicked through the pages, she came back. Gesturing to the book, I apologized for taking it out of her bag, guilty to have been caught snooping. Instead of acting outraged or shocked, she handed me a cup of coffee and a pastry, and told me about the book, which turned out to be one of her favorites.

As we ate, I watched her watch me. She was radiant this morning, and I couldn’t help but fall a little closer to being in love with her.

After we ate, she gathered up her bags, and wandered to my room to collect mine before we headed to the bus. Seeing her follow me into the room, I suddenly felt self conscious, changing only my shirt, despite knowing that I needed an entirely clean outfit. Instead, I settled on antiperspirant, making sure to grab new boxers this evening if we had a repeat performance.

Getting on the bus, we once more settled into easy conversation, and the day followed much the same pattern as the previous one. We developed a routine, where we would sightsee, and she would point things out to me as I watched her, we would eat with the group then go for a walk, ending the night entangled in each others arms.

The final morning, I awoke to her rubbing herself up my body, and we had quiet, passionate, beautiful sex. I think the vision of her that morning is something I will cherish, something that will stick with me for a long time. She looked so beautiful, so free, so unencumbered.

As she was packing, she gave me the book I had picked up.
“Something to remember me by,” she reasoned.

As we reached my room, I extracted a hat from my bags, handing it to her. “You may not have gotten to Texas, but here is a little bit of Texas to remember me by.”

Smiling, she thanked me, and we boarded the bus for one final journey.

We took one final picture together, agreeing not to exchange surnames, numbers, email addresses. It seemed perfect and romantic at the time but now, a week later, it seems stupid. I don’t know how I managed to let her walk away from me without something, without some way of contacting her.

And so, I guess that, my unknown reader, is the most important thing that has happened in my life recently.

Chapter End Notes

One of the theories about how the Australian accent came about is that children mostly heard their parents talking while drunk, and slowly this became the accent, even when the speaker was sober. It’s my favourite theory about the Australian accent.
Alice loves her job. Her work ethic had meshed perfectly with In Love Designs, and she has been offered a full time contract. Her duties will be varied, depending on the work that is needed, and will involve going to film locations at various points in time. Esme based the company in Seattle, because her husband, Carlisle, worked at the hospital, and lectured at the university here. He preferred Seattle to some of the larger cities, and Esme was happy to live here. The locations suited her, as she knew it was close enough to Vancouver to be contracted to work there, as well as dealing with the local film needs. But, In Love Designs is well respected within the industry, apparently, so they are often contracted to do other films, ones that require people on set in locations around the country. Esme obliges, and has teams that travel to sets around the country when they are needed. Alice doesn’t mind the potential travel, and is so enamored with Esme that she would have jumped off a cliff it was needed for the job.

I haven’t met Esme, but all I heard when I got home from class was Esme this and Esme that, so I felt like I already knew her.

So, I wasn’t surprised when Alice announced we were going to the Cullen Halloween party. The invitation, and the party for that matter, is a big deal, apparently, so Alice is going all out on our costumes. We haven’t dressed up in years, but Alice wants to impress Esme. Looking at photos from previous parties, I can understood why. People went all out at these parties.

I’m leaving it to Alice to decide what we were going to dress up as, finding it easier to simply endure her fittings, letting my mind wander as she pins and alters and measures.
Alice has a Buffy obsession, which she assures me is minor, and that she can deal with it, but I’m not so sure. She decided that we would go as dark Xander (me) and dark Willow (her). The costumes, I have to admit, were amazing. And, it was kinda fun getting the fangs, getting into the characters.

As soon as we arrived, at a time Alice deemed as fashionably late, Esme appeared. She was dressed as Dorothy, right down to the red ruby slippers. I started when I saw her. Alice had said that Esme had a daughter a year older than Alice, so I didn’t expect someone as youthful looking. Even if she had Rosalie really young, she had to be at least forty. She barely looked thirty. She ushered us into the party, insisting that we meet her family, introducing us to people as she almost pulled us through the room. Walking through the party, I was glad that Alice sewed so amazingly. She and I looked good, and we fitted in with the rest of the party goers. We would have stood out in cheap store bought costumes.

Esme led us into what I assumed was her living room, filled with soft couches and armchairs. Sitting in a small huddle, were the four people she felt we must meet. As if he sensed her presence, the oldest of the group looked up. He was dressed as the scarecrow, his face covered in makeup to complete the look. Despite this, he looked just as youthful as his wife. Going around the circle, Esme introduced Alice and I to Carlisle, her husband, dressed as the scarecrow, her daughter, dressed as the lion, and Emmett, Rosalie’s husband, dressed as the tin man. The costume was almost humorous on his huge form.

I had known that Esme had two children, Alice’s incessant chattering had informed me of that. I knew that Rosalie was year older than Alice, and I had assumed that Edward, her son was about the same age. So I was a little shocked when she leaned down, and took a small child out of Carlisle’s arms.

The child was dressed as Toto, clearly part of the family with the perfect match to the other costumes. She introduced the child as Edward, her youngest. Apparently, he was a bit of a surprise, to both Esme and Carlisle. Over the course of the evening, Alice and I got to know Carlisle, Emmett and Rosalie, as Esme flitted around, being the perfect hostess. Carlisle explained that he and Esme had tried for years to have another child, but were unable to conceive again, and didn’t have the money to try IVF when they were younger, while Rosalie was still a child. The knowledge caused Esme a lot of grief, as she had always wanted a big family, with lots of kids, lots of people to love and mouths to feed. But, unable to conceive again, Esme had made peace with the fact that she would only ever have one child, and poured all her love into Rosalie.

And, when Rosalie had first met Emmett, at the tender age of fourteen, Esme poured her love into him as well. They had dated for almost three years before Rosalie bought him home. Rosalie piped up at that stage of the story. “I love Mom so much, but I was terrified when I first bought Emmett home. Most normal mothers don’t like their daughter’s boyfriends, especially when they were two years older and built like a wall, like that. But, I guess Mom was never really a normal mother. I was expecting a lecture. Instead, Mom wrapped Emm into her arms, and insisted on feeding him. So, he immediately loved Mom. But, I knew, when I first met him, when I was twelve and he was
thirteen, that he was the one for me. Aren’t you, babe?”

Emmett smiled, and kissed Rosalie. I had to look away, there was such passion and love in the kiss, I felt like I was intruding on something private between the two of them. “Of course I am, babe.”

Carlisle took up the story again then. “Esme and I had basically accepted that we would be a single child family. When Emmett came on the scene, he became part of the family almost instantly, and Esme felt that her family was on the way to being big enough. She decided that if we weren’t going to have a conventional family, then she would slowly build her own family.

“Then, two years ago, she began to feel a bit off color. She assumed she had the seasonal flu, and went about life as normal. But, it didn’t go away, and we began to think that there was something more serious wrong. So we sought professional help.

“I’m a doctor, but I didn’t even pick up that my wife was pregnant. We had been so sure, so resigned that we couldn’t have any more children, that we didn’t even entertain the possibility. Until, after running basic tests, our family doctor gave us the good news.

“We were in shock the entire pregnancy. We had been young when we had Rosalie, me twenty and Esme twenty three. Barely adults ourselves. Rosalie was nineteen when Edward was conceived, so, we were pretty much as old as you could be to have children. We made sure that everything was progressing properly. I think Esme would have been crushed if there had been a birth defect, if the doctors had advised terminating the pregnancy.

“We were lucky, and Edward is perfect. He’s sixteen months old now, and ridiculously curious. We might be more mature, more financially stable, but it’s no easier the second time round.

“And, I don’t know what we would do without the help of these two,” he finished, gesturing to Rosalie and Emmett.

“Dad, it’s nothing. You know how much I love kids. It’s just not our time for any of our own yet. Besides, I have a garage and mentor program to set up.”

I blinked, unsure how to interpret Rosalie’s last statement. Not many girls were as car conscious as my sister, and even for her the car was an accessory, not something to devote her life to. Something about Rosalie told me that she was going to get what she wanted, that she was a hard nosed, no nonsense kind of person that would stand up to any crap she might get thrown her way.
By the time I had gotten over my shock, the conversation had become lighter, moved to more frivolous more humorous subjects. Esme arrived back, and settled by her husband’s side on the couch. I could see the love radiating off them, and felt a pang of jealousy.

Alice and I were some of the last people to leave, being shooed out by Esme after we tried to help her clean up. She insisted that it could wait to the morning, that we didn’t need to worry ourselves.

When we got home, I felt lonelier than I had in years, missed my parents more than I had forever.

January 3, 2008

Esme has become kind of like a second mother to Alice and I, and we have become part of her family. I don’t even know how it happened, but I woke up on Boxing day with this stunning realization.

But, I guess I should have seen it happening, what with spending Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years with Esme and her family.

It’s nice, to have a family again, a family that exists outside of Alice and I.

March 17, 2008

As much as I am petrified about the upcoming exams, I have to say that college is awesome. Or, more, the classes for my major are awesome. The general studies classes, not so much.

I think I have finally (or well, amazingly) decided on my major: English literature, with a minor in history. And, I want to do a masters in Architecture. I was lucky enough to enroll in a second year english course this semester, focusing on the gothic. The teacher is amazing, and as much as we analyse the books, we also analyse the architecture of the period, of the books. One of her biggest points is that often, buildings and locations in books become a character. And, it’s so true. I mean, think about Dracula. The count’s castle, or the crypt, or even the count’s house in London are as much a part of the story as Lucy or Jonathan are. Without them, the story would be lacking something. And, as I thought about that, I started to think about how important buildings were, in general. I mean, they play such a huge part of our lives. Alice and I can’t sell the house in Texas, because of the emotions attached to it. Esme’s house is beautiful, it’s an extension of her, almost.
So, I decided on architecture. I’m going to be an architect.

And, my unknown reader, the thought that I have a career in front of me, a path and focus for my life, is truly exhilarating.
Interlude 2

Esme… Lise thought. *This must be the Esme I’m named for. Esme and her son… Edward. Is that the same Edward as the one sitting downstairs?*

Lise wasn’t totally sure, but it felt right. Plus, Jasper put in dates. And the dates seemed right. Now she knew that the people she was reading about were teenagers… eighty something years ago. Her great grandfather was in his eighties, so it fitted.

The coincidence was too big for her not to be related to the people she was reading about in the notebooks. Her names were unusual. Old-fashioned. Out of style even. But she liked it, because she was never one of the twenty Simones or Katnisses or Bethanies in her class.

And. Wow.

The amount of information Jasper was giving in his notebook *might* just be inappropriate. He gave the notebook to his daughter, after all. Lise knew how horrified she would be if she ever knew anything about her parents sex life. But… he did say that he didn’t know who the book was written for. It sounded like Jasper and Lilly were wrapped up in a bubble of lust and love on the trip. He sounded… almost lost in writing about Alice and Lilly. With Esme, the tone… it started to change. He started to sound like he was, well, not so lost.

Lise was drawn the stories she was reading.

She wanted to know how Jasper got from being a first year college student, majoring in english literature and planning a masters in architecture to a movie actor. If they ended up meeting again, face to face.

Snuggling back into the armchair, Lise turned the page, eager to find out the rest of Jasper’s story.
My unknown reader, I didn’t see Rosalie or Emmett again after Thanksgiving. They weren’t at Esme’s for Christmas, or for New Years Eve. In fact, they weren’t around for any of the holidays between New Years Eve and Independence Day.

Esme had explained that they had spent most of the last year in Paris, Tennessee, with Emmett’s mother. His father had never really been in the picture, so when his mother got sick, he began to spend more and more time down there. When she had moved into respite care just before Christmas, he and Rosalie decided that they would formally defer their studies, and move down for as long as was needed. Emmett’s mother had passed away in April, and they had spent almost six weeks clearing out her house, putting it on the market, putting her affairs in order. Doing all those things that they were both too young to be doing, really.

Esme had gone down for the week before, and the week after the funeral, to lend her support. But, she knew that she had to let them stand on their feet, and returned home with the knowledge that if they needed anything, she would be on the next plane down.

Independence Day was going to be the first event they were at, the first time they really saw people after getting back to Seattle.

I was stunned when Emmett and Rosalie walked into the party. The previous time we had met, both of them were in costume, obscuring their figures and looks.

But, for the fourth of July party, neither were in costume, and I was amazed by Rosalie’s looks. I had gathered that she was pretty at Halloween, but her looks were hidden under her costume. Seeing her today, I was floored by how beautiful she was.

I now understood why it is such a struggle for her in the mechanics community. Just standing here, in fairly plain jeans and a pale pink t shirt, she looked like 1950s pin up model. She looked like
every teenage boy’s wet dream. She didn’t look like she would fit in the world of mechanics, in the
dirt and grease that went with it.

Emmett was as huge as the last time I saw him, but his eyes were harder, sadder. I knew from
experience that the dead look he had would slowly fade, that both Alice and I had gotten through
the loss of our parents, but I knew how hard it would be for him.

Quietly, during the party, both Alice and I offered our support to Emmett, our condolences. We
knew how empty the words could sound, but also knew how it could help having someone else
who understood, who could help you deal with the loss. Emmett had Rosalie, but her grief was not
that of a child loosing a parent. Alice and I knew the pain of loosing a parent. Where we had had
each other for support, we knew we could offer that to Emmett.

I watched Rosalie and Emmett during the party, watched the love that flowed between them. While
Alice and I had both offered our support, as people who had lost their parents, I began to realize
that Emmett would be support for each other, would be enough to get each other through. Where
Alice and I had gotten each other through, Emmett and Rosalie would get each other through.

July 24, 2008

Rosalie and Emmett came round for dinner last night, taking us up on our offer to talk if they
needed it.

They were both so apologetic when they arrived, apologizing for inviting themselves over,
apologizing for how much Emmett ate (which Esme had warned us about, so we had catered for
that), apologizing for not talking to us more on Independence Day, apologizing they didn’t have us
round to their place, apologizing for being five minutes late arriving, apologizing for staying too
late.

The dinner had the potential to be very uncomfortable, but once Alice, ever tactful, called attention
to the elephant in the room, the fact that Esme and the death of our parents were our only real
points in common, the evening flowed much better.

It was a fun evening, and when Rosalie and Emmett finally left, I had the feeling we would be
seeing them again. Something clicked, and it felt like they were already friends, already family.

December 6, 2008
Alice and I finally heard all of Rosalie’s story today.

We had gathered that she and Emmett wanted children, but that there was some complication, some reason why they were unable to.

We didn’t know the full extent of the problems.

Rosalie said she grew up in Rochester, New York. She was thirteen when Carlisle had relocated the family, taking them away from the tragedy and media scrutiny that was in Rochester.

It turns out, when Rosalie was twelve, she was a hit and run victim. She had been walking home, with her best friend Vera, safely on the sidewalk like we are always told, and a car swerved off the road, hitting her and Vera before driving away.

Vera, walking on the inside, sustained a broken leg, but otherwise remained conscious throughout the experience.

Rosalie said she doesn’t really remember anything until she woke up in the hospital.

Vera later told her that the car had been dark green, a pickup. It had been driving towards them, and aimed. Rosalie hadn’t seen it, because she had been pointing something out, something in the garden of the house they were walking past. Vera hadn’t been able to pull Rosalie enough out of the way, although doctors said that it had been enough that Rosalie wasn’t killed instantly, that Vera wasn’t hurt more.

Rosalie says she has vague memories of the car following them around, of it just kinda being on their route home each day, for several weeks. But, she thought nothing of it. They lived in a safe neighborhood, in a safe area.

Vera, still conscious, and in a lot of pain as the pickup pulled away, started screaming at the top of her lungs. Two doors down, a stay at home mom had come out, and saw the girls lying on the sidewalk. Saw the blood pooling around Rosalie. It turned out she was a trauma nurse, a fact that probably saved Rosalie’s life. She had taken one look, and rushed back inside, returning with a huge first aid kit, and started to stop the bleeding, to stabilize Rosalie while the ambulance arrived. When it did, she gathered up her two children, two year old twins, and got in the ambulance with Rosalie, and Vera.
On the way, she had rung Vera and Rosalie’s parents, and was shocked when Carlisle greeted them at the hospital. They had worked together several years previously, and she remembered his skill, his ability to soothe patients and work miracles. She was heart broken that the girl, so fragile and broken looking, was Carlisle’s only child.

Rosalie says she and Vera were almost instantly taken into surgery. Vera’s leg was set, and Rosalie’s rounds of surgeries started. All up, she had five surgeries.

She had broken 40 bones, including bones in her hands, arms, ribs, legs, her hips and feet. Some were set in the first surgery, others needed the swelling to go down before they could be set. Some, like the ribs, could never be set, and had to be allowed to heal by themselves, hoping that they healed correctly.

She woke up in excruciating pain, unable to move her head. Although a spinal injury had been ruled out, with the unset ribs, and the other injuries she had suffered, her head was still in a neck brace. It was a week before it came off. Despite the pain she was in, the doctors were being very careful administering morphine, knowing how long she was going to be in hospital, how easy it was to become addicted. On top of all her other problems, she didn’t need an addiction to pain medication. So, the doctors and nurses toed a careful line between enough morphine to allow her to breathe easily, so that she didn’t develop pneumonia because of her broken ribs, and too much morphine, which would lead to an addiction.

Over the next three weeks, Rosalie says she had an additional three surgeries, to continue to correct broken bones, insert screws and metal plates. By the time she had been in hospital a month, she had undergone four surgeries, each with general anesthetic. It was horrible, and she said that each time they put her under the anesthetic, she was petrified that she wouldn’t wake up again.

Vera, with her leg in a cast, had been allowed to go home after just four days. Rosalie, on the other hand, was in the hospital for almost four months.

The combination of the accident, and the surgeries had greatly weakened her immune system. Millions of people are unknowing carriers of viruses such as whooping cough and TB, never presenting symptoms themselves, unconsciously infecting those around them. During her time in hospital, Rosalie was unlucky enough to encounter one of these people. Or, she was a carrier herself, already having an inactive infection in her system, which jumped on the opportunity presented by her weakened immune system.

Five weeks after being admitted, Rosalie began to develop the first symptoms of tuberculosis. Because many of the symptoms are similar to other, more common, diseases, or reactions to the
antibiotics being pumped into her system or, just the accident itself, it wasn’t picked up immediately. Rosalie began to loose weight, and felt lethargic and tired all the time. Her appetite was decreased, and she developed a severe cough. A week after developing the cough, she developed a fever, and night sweats.

Although she presented with many of the traditional markers of tuberculosis, she was asymptomatic in that the infection was not based in her lungs and respiratory system. It took nearly a month to diagnose her with Tuberculosis. By that stage, it had a firm hold on her body. While most people with tuberculosis will have it in the lungs, the infection attacked Rosalie’s fallopian tubes and uterus.

During all this, Rosalie had begun physical therapy. She had been bed ridden for almost six weeks while she healed, and needed to learn to walk again, to use muscles that had begun to atrophy with disuse.

The highlight of her PT sessions, she said, was watching the burly guy with the gorgeous dimples and curls, as he went through his paces.

Her therapist had noticed her watching, and two weeks after starting sessions, organized for Rosalie to meet Emmett. It was his birthday, and his therapist knew he had been watching Rosalie, wanting to talk to her, but unable to find the courage.

The two therapists had Rosalie and Emmett come to the session an hour early, and had a cake set up for the two of them to share. They placed the two teens in their office, visible through the window, but private enough that they didn’t feel like their conversations were being intruded on by the adults.

Both were thrilled to be pushed together, and tongue tied around each other.

Slowly, as they ate cake, they began to get to know each other. They learnt each other’s names, and ages. Emmett was just fourteen, two years older than Rosalie’s twelve years.

Emmett’s therapist knew his situation, and watched the relationship he was building with Rosalie. They both seemed to light up with the other was around.

Emmett had been holidaying in Rochester, on a week away with his mother. He had been hiking with her, in Letchwork State Park, when he had slipped in an unseen hole, and broken his left
fibula, tibia, patella, and femur. His mother was single, and if she didn’t work, she would be unable to pay for his medical expenses. As it was, she was unable to pay for the specialized transportation from Rochester to their home in Tennessee that Emmett and his injuries would need. So, she had had to return home, leaving Emmett alone in the hospital miles from home and his family. His PT in Rochester was going well, and his therapist thought that in another six weeks, or two months at the most, he would be able to return home. But until then, he was alone in a strange place.

So, the therapists talked to the doctors, and the nurses, and had Emmett moved into the same ward as Rosalie.

Both of them were happy with the turn of events. Even with her father working at the hospital, and her mother spending as much time as she could there, Rosalie was lonely. The highlight of her day had been watching Emmett’s PT sessions.

Emmett spent another six weeks in Rochester, in the hospital bed next to Rosalie’s. They got to know each other, talking about anything and everything. Emmett confessed that without Rosalie, he didn’t know what he would have done.

Leaving was one of the hardest things he had ever had to do. He was so enthralled by Rosalie, and didn’t want to leave her alone. As she had healed, as the TB had been treated, she had become more and more beautiful to him.

By the time he left, he was sure that he was in love with her. With her beauty, strength, vivacity. She had endured so much, was enduring so much, and she was still happy. She was his sunshine, the brightness in his day.

He didn’t want to leave her there, alone in the hospital, even though they both knew she would be out in just two more weeks.

In their conversations, they had discussed everything from favorite subjects to their common love of fast cars, to children, and how many they would have. Emmett had agreed with Rosalie that six would be the perfect number.

Despite treating the TB, Rosalie said she was left with scarring on her uterus and fallopian tubes from the infection. The seven months she spent on antibiotics, the first because of the accident, and the final six to treat the TB, meant that she developed Salpingitis, an infection of her fallopian tubes. The inflammation was so bad, that no antibiotics managed to control it.
Knowing how young Rosalie was, her doctors were very cautious about their course of action, but really only one avenue was open to them.

They had to remove Rosalie’s fallopian tubes, a procedure they insisted on referring to as a bilateral Salpingo-oopherectomy, effectively making her infertile at the age of twelve. Because, along with removing her fallopian tubes, the doctors removed both her ovaries. These, however, were stored for her, so that in the future, there was the possibility of using mature eggs for IVF procedures. However, without ovaries or fallopian tubes, they were unable to say if she would be able to even sustain a pregnancy. The bilateral Salpingo-oopherectomy was her fifth surgery. After the surgery, she was told she would be on a life long hormone replacement treatment. Because, her bones, her body wouldn’t develop properly unless exposed to the hormones usually regulated by a system that involved the ovaries. Without them, the system wouldn’t work properly. She was lucky, and the hormones she took simply replaced the ones that her ovaries contributed to the cycle.

She had gone into the surgery three days after Emmett had left, and had fallen asleep thinking of him, knowing he was her reason to wake up.

After the surgery, she had called Emmett, and cried over the phone with him as she mourned the children they had talked about. Mourned the loss of the picture they had built up, the two of them old and grey, surrounded by a brood of grandchildren.

Rosalie had thought that once she was out of hospital, and simply had to attend her twice weekly PT sessions, then everything would begin to return to normal.

Little did she know how wrong she had been.

She had been interviewed by police a few days after she woke up in hospital, but had soon forgotten the experience. Except maybe remembering the car following her and Vera around, she really didn’t remember anything. While she had been in hospital, a case had slowly been built. The driver that had knocked her down had been caught in a random breath test station three days after the accident. The vehicle had matched Vera’s descriptions, as well as stills taken from security cameras near the school. And, the driver had been cocky enough not to wash Rosalie and Vera’s blood off his bumper, making it impossible for him to lie, and claim that it wasn’t him and his car that had hit the girls.

But, as it turned out, Rosalie and Vera weren’t his only victims.

When he was first taken into custody, the story got a huge amount of media attention. Because the
guy driving the pick up was none other than Royce King Junior, son of banking executive and media mogul Royce King Senior. It was big news, a big scandal that the son of such a successful, highly public figure had been arrested for the hit and run.

And, because of the media coverage, police in other states started to come forward with similar unsolved crimes.

By the time that Rosalie was out of hospital, there were eighteen other cases of hit and runs, in three states. In every case there was a girl about twelve, about Rosalie’s stature, blond and blue eyed, that was the victim of King. As with her and Vera, there were eleven incidences where two girls had been hit. A total of twenty-two girls had been injured and eight killed by Royce. Police and prosecutors were gathering a case against him for each of the incidences, and there was debate on where to try him. It hadn’t been decided if he should be tried in each of the three states, or should be tried simultaneously for all three states at the same time.

In the end, they conducted the trial in for all three states simultaneously. King was charged with eight counts of homicide, and twenty two counts of assault. In addition, a second trial was held against Royce’s father and his body guards, for covering up more than half the crimes.

Rosalie said the trial was horrible. She had to testify, but as she didn’t remember the incident, most of her testimony became concerned with the injuries she sustained, and the time she spent in hospital. While the prosecution was nice to her in the questioning, the defense was horrible, questioning her on her multiple surgeries, focusing especially on her final surgery, and the fact she had developed TB. They tried to insinuate that, like prostitutes in the Victorian era, she already had TB, or consumption as they insisted on calling it, and it was because she was having sex that she had gotten the disease. One of the other causes of the Salpingitis she had suffered was unsafe sexual practices. She was barely thirteen, and had been twelve at the time of the accident. She hadn’t even gotten her period yet. And, of course never would.

But, she said that the prosecutors kept on pushing the point, trying to make it look like the Salpingitis was her fault, that the TB was her fault. That she, despite being under the age of consent, and a virgin at the time of the accident, she had done those things to herself. That the catalyst of the accident wasn’t to blame for them.

She had left the witness stand feeling humiliated in a way that none of the invasive medical procedures had. Despite the lies they were spewing, she saw several of the men on the jury nodding as the prosecutors insinuated that she was an immoral whore, who had bought the TB and salpingitis upon herself.

She had been in tears, broken when she got home. She called Emmett, knowing that he was the only one who could make her feel better, whole again.
The trial dragged on for nearly six months. And, along with the testimony she had to give, she was constantly hounded by the media. For the six months the trial, there were reporters camping out on the street outside her house, outside her school.

She told us that Emmett was the only reason that she stayed sane during that time. All her personal freedom had been taken away from her. She couldn’t just walk to the shops with her friends for an ice cream any more. Esme and Carlisle now drove her to and from school. They had been granted special permission to drive almost to the doors, and would usher her into the building in the mornings, usher her out of the building at the end of the day. She had missed so much school that she was massively behind, and it made her feel even more exposed in her classes than usual.

But, every night she would talk to Emmett on the phone. Their conversations started cautiously, neither knowing the rules of a long distance friendship. Or, as the years passed and the relationship developed, how to have a long distance relationship where you hadn’t even kissed.

Rosalie told us that it was Emmett who helped her catch up on her school work. He had managed to get his hands on copies of all her text books, on the set texts for English, and would tutor her over the phone. He would talk her through her math problems, discuss literature and history and science with her. By the end of the school year, she was almost caught up to the same level as her classmates.

When the trial concluded that summer, Royce was found guilty of the eight charges of murder and twenty-two of assault. Royce was sentenced to fifteen life sentences, to be served back to back. He was given no options for parole, ever. His father was sentenced to life in prison, for obstructing justice, and concealing crime, as were two of his thugs. Their combined assets were seized by the government, and the companies sold. The profits, after the court costs were covered, were divided between the victims and their families, as a small measure of compensation.

The outcome was as satisfying as could be expected, but the media attention didn’t die down.

So, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the summer break, Esme and Carlisle packed the car and left. They had spent the previous month slowly packing up their house, packing removal trucks in the middle of the night, and sending everything to Washington. Carlisle had secured himself at job at the Seattle Children’s Hospital, and Esme’s business was where ever she was.

They had hired people to house sit for a month, following the same basic routine of the Cullens during summer, to give them some breathing space to settle into Seattle. They had left cars in Rochester, which some college students would drive across at the end of summer. When the month was over, the house in Rochester was put up for sale. The reporters had failed to spot the ruse. So,
when the reporters realized that the Cullens were no longer in the house, they had no active leads to find them. The media attention was no longer a problem.

Rosalie said she was sad to be leaving Rochester, sad to be leaving her friends, to be leaving Vera, but didn’t mind really. She was glad of the peace and quiet that greeted them in Seattle, the anonymity and the ability to walk out the door without being surrounded by photographers.

And, she took her most important relationship with her. She still talked to Emmett every day. Carlisle had set up a second phone line for her, one that had really cheap call rates to Tennessee, so Rosalie could talk for as long as she liked.

Although Rosalie was caught up with all her schooling, Emmett continued to get his hands on copies of her school books, and continued to tutor her. Rosalie wasn’t dumb, but also wasn’t anything more than a straight C student before she met Emmett. She simply hadn’t cared enough to put more effort in. Emmett, on the other hand, was very bright, and very motivated. He, even as a teen, was huge, and most people passed him off as dumb. But, he was a straight A student, and under his careful guiding hand, Rosalie became a B+ and A student.

Emmett took over the story then. He told us how his mother worked so hard to raise him, and how his father was never around. He never really got the full story of his parenting, but he assumed that his mother didn’t know who the father was, or didn’t want the father to know about him, because no one was listed on his birth certificate. Either way, it meant that his mother was a single parent. His mother worked so hard, his entire childhood, and the accident hadn’t helped. His medical bills were huge, and barely covered by the health insurance that his mother held. Rosalie understood this, and she was the one ringing him. He couldn’t afford the long distance calls.

Tutoring Rosalie became one of the highlights of his days. Her mind was so agile, and she picked up things so easily when she tried. They would talk for hours, and each time they talked, he fell in love with her just a little bit more.

By the end of his freshman year, he had made two decisions. The first was that he was going to get a job, to help his mother out with things like groceries, and save money for when he went to college. The second was that he was going to graduate early, and go to Seattle to be with Rosalie.

He went to see his guidance counsellor, to discuss the ways he could gain extra credit for graduation. The summer between his sophomore and junior year, he took intensive online classes, and completed a semesters worth of work in just six weeks. He also found a job at the local supermarket, and although it was minimum wage, he worked there six days a week over the summer. He carefully arranged his schedule so that he would be at home for his daily phone all from Rosalie. He used his employee discount and started doing the shopping for himself and his mother. He discovered the joys of things like tofu, as full of protein as meat, but like a third of the
price. One of his online courses was a human biology and nutrition course, and he applied what he learnt there to the meals he began to prepare at home. He figured that he ate so much, because he was growing, and huge, that he should at least know how to feed himself correctly. One of his other classes was a horticulture class, online and two years long. The basic premise of the course was to create a kitchen garden. Emmett said, that coupled with his nutrition course, he became very passionate about the garden he was growing. He got very excited about the vegetables that grew, although the herbs were his favorite. It was exciting the way that they would die off in the winter, and come back in spring.

Between the two of the courses, he had managed to dramatically reduce the money his mother had to spend on every day expenses. He knew that he had made her life easier, and was glad.

He managed to save a huge proportion of his pay check that summer. He kept working during the school year, although only four days a week. He still paid for the groceries, so the amount he saved during the school year was much less than what he saved during the holidays.

With the leg injury, he wasn’t allowed to play any contact sports. He had loved football, and so he was saddened to learn that he would never play again. But, he discovered triathlon. The town didn’t have a public pool, but seventeen miles from the high school was a lake, part of the state park. Twice a week, as part of their training, the members of the team would cycle there, swim, and cycle back. Once a week, they would train for the running section of the triathlon. Because the ride to and from the lake took about an hour each way, the members of the triathlon team were given their first two periods off free on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for training.

While not the traditional body shape for triathalon, Emmett said he loved the training and the exercise it gave him. His PT therapist in Paris had been pleased when he started, knowing the things it could do for his muscle strength. Despite the impact of running on his joints, it was safe for him to participate.

He went to four meets while he was in high school, and he managed to place fourth in the state in his junior year.

In the summer between his sophomore and junior year, he again took intensive online courses. By the time his junior year finished, he had enough credits to graduate, which he did.

Three weeks after he graduated, he made the agonizing decision to leave his mother and go to Seattle. He was sixteen, impetuous, and strong headed. He had been accepted to attend the University of Washington the next year, into a pre-law english degree. He was thrilled to be seeing Rosalie again. Despite speaking on the phone every day, they hadn’t seen each other since he left the hospital two and a half years earlier.
He didn’t own a car, and couldn't justify the cost of a flight, so he decided to catch a bus to Seattle. It took him almost three days, and he had to transfer busses four times, but he said he knew it would be worth it.

Because when he arrived in Seattle, the first face he saw when he stepped off the bus was Rosalie’s.

Carlisle and Esme had been kind enough to let him stay with them while he studied. They weren’t going to charge him rent. He had argued with them about this, but secretly he was relieved and pleased. He was so grateful, knowing that it would cut the cost of his education significantly. Later, they confided in him that they didn’t charge him rent because they knew that he was family already, knew that one day he would be their son.

He said he was amazed how Rosalie had matured in his absence. She had been beautiful when he last saw her, but stepping off the bus, she was stunning. He knew that he had to wait, that they were both so young, but in that moment, all he wanted to do was propose, to bind himself to her forever.

So, Emmett moved in with the Cullens. He was given his own bedroom, and a queen sized bed which still felt tiny to him. There were ground rules, including an open doors policy until both of them were over the age of consent.

Like he had for his mother, Emmett started a kitchen garden in Esme’s back yard. He built a greenhouse, and found systems that would allow him to grow things like peppers and tomatoes all year.

He found a job, and worked just as hard as he had when he was at home. The difference now, was that when he got home from work, Rosalie was there, waiting for him.

Rosalie spent most of that summer restoring a jeep. She had found the hulking 1942 army jeep complete with hardtop in a junkyard, slowly rusting in a corner. It still had its original motor, and the owner sold it to her for a few hundred dollars. The only subject that Emmett hadn’t needed to tutor Rosalie in was auto shop, her favorite class. For extra credit, Rosalie was restoring the jeep. Well, that was the surface reason. But, in truth, she was restoring it as a gift for Emmett. She would fill her days, the time while he was at work, doing stuff to the jeep. Carlisle and Esme had kindly allowed her to turn their garage into her workshop, banishing the family cars to a summer in the heat, under a shade cloth.
By the time Rosalie and Emmett started school in the fall, the jeep was finished, working perfectly. It turned out that the body and engine were both structurally sound, working. Rosalie had converted the motor to run on unleaded petrol, cleaned the car, redid the upholstery, and gave it to Emmett. Emmett loved it. It was perfect for him, big enough that he didn’t feel like he was driving a clown car, and small enough that he didn’t feel like he was driving a tank, like a lot of the huge pickups felt.

Rosalie had three years of high school left, and with Emmett tutoring her, she became a straight A student.

On her sixteen birthday, Esme and Carlisle allowed Rosalie and Emmett to drop the open door rule. They instigated a new rule, that the two must sleep in separate beds, in different rooms every night. They were give a curfew of eleven pm, by which stage both were expected to be in their own rooms.

The summer after Rosalie restored the jeep for Emmett, she had restored a 1973 Cheverlet Corvette convertible for herself. The body was really dented, and the motor wasn’t going, so the task had been much more involved than Emmett’s jeep. Because the body was so dented, she had spent weeks removing all the dents. Which also removed much of the paint.

Once it was completed, drivable, Rosalie had taken to have the paint resprayed. The Chevy had been a dirty brown colour, the paint chipped and rusty. Rosalie wanted it sprayed lipstick red. When she arrived, the owner of the garage, Marty, had taken one look at the car and demanded to know who did the work on it. It took two hours to convince him that she had done the work. After two hours describing everything she had done, and outlining the work she had done on Emmett’s car, and a phone call to her auto shop teacher, Marty was convinced. He offered her a part time job, three days a week after school during her senior year.

The day that Rosalie graduated high school, Esme and Carlisle relaxed their rules again. Emmett and Rosalie could sleep in the same room, with the door closed.

Rosalie had decided that she wasn’t going to university, instead continuing her studies to be a mechanic. She increased the time she spent working for Marty, and enrolled in a mechanics course. And, suddenly she found herself in a very male world, one that was less than forgiving that she was female, that she looked like she did.

She said that her time as an apprentice made her harder, colder. She knew the things people thought about her, the stereotypes that people clung to. She said she had heard every joke about her being female, about her belonging in the reception, in the kitchen, in the home. It had made her stronger, and she knew that part of it was simply because she was better, more skilled, than most of the guys.
The day that Emmett graduated, and, his place in the UW School of Law was confirmed, he
proposed. He had been planning to do something fancy, to take Rosalie to a restaurant, to feed her
expensive champagne and strawberries, but instead, he simply took her out to the garage, which
Esme and Carlisle had never gotten back and was now Rosalie’s permanent work space, sat down
on the bench he would sit on while he did his school work and she worked on cars, pulled out a
ring, and asked her to marry him.

Rosalie said that her response was that she had been waiting for him to ask her since the first met
and shared his birthday cake all those years ago.

They were married within the month. She was nineteen, and he was twenty. Carlisle and Esme
gave them the apartment they still live in as a wedding present.

Their wedding was a small, simple affair. Carlisle contacted the two physical therapists from
Rochester, and invited them to the wedding. They were both thrilled to hear that Emmett and
Rosalie had made it, and thrilled to attend the wedding. Emmett’s mother Anabelle came up from
Paris, and Carlisle and Esme acted as witness. They got married in a simple service at the local
courthouse, and had their honeymoon in a cabin overlooking the ocean, in a small town called
Forks a few hours drive from Seattle.

Rosalie finished her studies a year after they were married, and got a full time job with Marty. With
her full time income, Rosalie and Emmett said they started to look into the possibility of having
children.

So, they started the expensive, and time hungry and emotionally exhausting process of IVF.
Carlisle had taken the money Rosalie got as compensation from Royce, and invested it. The sum
had grown as Rosalie did, and meant that she and Emmett didn’t have to worry about the costs of
IVF like Carlisle and Esme had. Both Rosalie and Emmett knew that the IVF treatment was a long
shot, but wanted to try anyway. Rosalie still wanted her big family, still wanted the children and
grand children. They knew the risks involved, and the incredibly low chances of conception.
Because Rosalie’s ovaries had been removed before she started to menstruate, she had never had
her period. The first year, before they even tried to implant a fertilized egg, Rosalie had been given
a cocktail of hormones, to simulate the process of egg production, to simulate menses, to encourage
her uterus to form a lining for the egg to implant into.

Over the year, she had her period for the first time ever, twice. She said she was over the moon,
ecstatic that it was possible. But, they were light, and she didn’t have anything even resembling a
regular cycle. She kept being fed the hormones, and the next year, her periods continued. They
were still light, but becoming progressively more regular. Twenty months after starting treatment,
the doctors implanted the first fertilized egg. When we met them, last Halloween, they had just had
the sixth egg implanted. They were hopeful that this one would stick, but like the others, it didn’t. They had continued the treatment for another six months. Another six failed implants. As Emmett’s mother got sicker, they had hoped that Rosalie would become pregnant, that she would know that she had a grandchild before she passed away.

Sadly, it hadn’t happened, and after Emmett’s mother had passed away, they had decided to stop the treatment. The stress was too much, the hormones were wreaking havoc on Rosalie’s moods.

So, they started looking into alternatives, into surrogacy and adoption.

Emmett went back to his studies. He had finished his law degree the year before we met him, and as his mother got sicker, had deferred his place in the highly prestigious Law of Sustainable International Development Graduate program. He had returned to it on September, and found that it was exactly what he wanted to be doing.

Rosalie had returned to Marty’s. She was saving to buy her own garage, and start a female apprentice program. She was mentoring a few girls doing their apprenticeships at the moment, and knew how valuable a supportive influence could be, how much it could help break into the world of men.

By the time they finished talking, I was speechless. They were still so young, and had been through so much. I was honored that they had trusted Alice and I enough to share their story with us, to open themselves up to us like they had.
She literally fell into my lap, the first day of class.

My unknown reader, I am in my fourth year of my history and literature degree, UW all the way. My classes are pretty small, and honestly I should recognize everyone in the class. For my major subjects that is. I’ve finished all the general studies classes, and they were all huge. But for my majors, I have been in class with these people for the last three years. I thought I knew everyone.

This girl was completely unfamiliar to me. She is short, with porcelain skin and huge, chocolate eyes. Doe eyes, my sister would call them.

I could see her tripping, powerless to stop it happening. It was all I could do to lift my arms, wrap them around her to cushion her landing. In my lap. I think I was as shocked as she was when she actually ended up in my lap, her cheeks coloring as she blushed with embarrassment.

Helping her to her feet, I motioned to the seat beside me.

“I’m Jasper. And you look a little lost, darling. New here?” I smiled, trying to be charming and suave, and trying not to embarrass her further.

“She sat down, and I smiled. My day seemed to be picking up. It was only the second day of term, of the year, but already I had been late to two classes yesterday, and this morning I had spilt my coffee on myself, making it necessary to go home and change before I went to class. So I was late again.
But, my meeting with this girl seemed to be a way that I could turn it all around. She was beautiful, is beautiful, but I didn’t want to sleep with her. I wanted to get to know her, to be her friend. A sentiment I hadn’t felt in a long time. The last girl I had wanted to get to know was Lilly.

After our class ended, I asked if she would like to have coffee with me sometime. She looked a bit pensive at first, but then reluctantly agreed. It turned out that we both had a free two hour block before our next classes, so I suggested we walk a few blocks off campus to a small, independent coffee store. I explained to her that while there were several chain coffee stores on campus, this one was just nicer. Better coffee, better atmosphere. Better. She agreed to the walk, and we made our way there.

The entire walk she seemed wary, like she would jump at any shadow in her path, like she wanted no more than to run away. She reminded me of a deer that you might stumble across on a mountain trail, something that was frozen in hesitation, trying to decide if it was safer to stay or run away. I have no idea what would make her react like that, as if I was a monster, a threat. Or, perhaps the threat wasn’t me, but something unseen.

As we sat down in the big squishy chairs that are one of the things I love so much about this coffee place, I started talking. I guessed that she was going to be hesitant to tell me too much about herself, after she shot me down about why she transferred. But, I could talk about myself and my sister, help ease her pain, to help her feel more comfortable in my presence.

As I talked, I accidentally stumbled across a topic that she seemed comfortable talking about, that seemed to make her light up. In passing, I had told her about the *Gunslinger* series, and about how much I loved it. In the middle of raving about the books, she jumped in.

“He’s such an amazing story teller, isn’t he? I mean, the horror books scare the bejesus out of me, but I have read almost all of them. Because they are so amazingly crafted, they suck you in. I had to sleep with the light on for two and a half weeks after reading *Misery*. But the Dark Tower series has to be my favorite. I love Roland. You kinda have his eyes, icy blue, like faded denim, bombardier eyes.”

And with that, we found our common ground. I was sad when it was time to return to campus, to go to our classes. I made sure we swapped numbers, and I told her if she needed anything, to call. I know how it is to be in a new city. I had the support of Alice when we moved here. Bella had shared so little of herself, but it had slipped out that she knew no one here, was alone in a big, new city.

*November 15, 2010*
I finally asked Bella what she was doing for Thanksgiving. Alice has been bugging me about it for weeks, but I don’t want to be presumptuous. Alice has insisted that Bella has to come to Thanksgiving, that she has to join our circle of friends. I didn’t want to impose on Esme, until Alice (meddling pixie that she is) got her to phone me. And so, I had both Esme and Alice bugging me to ask Bella about it.

In our regular coffee time, I tried (and failed I think) to casually ask if she was going home for Thanksgiving. She got the deer on the trail look again, and I wondered if all the progress we had made was going to go backwards. I knew that she didn’t talk about her parents, ever, but thought she might have friends she would like to visit. Make good use of the four day weekend and all that.

After explaining that my sister really wanted to meet her, that we had Thanksgiving with her boss Esme, who had become like a second mother to us, that Esme loved to cook and had told me to invite Bella, after all that, Bella finally agreed. She wasn’t going back to Jacksonville, and had actually been dreading the holiday.

She asked if there was anything she could bring, explaining her love of cooking. I knew Esme always over catered, even with Emmett there, but couldn’t deny Bella this. After a quick call to Esme, Bella agreed to bring desert - pecan and pumpkin pies.

November 25, 2010

I don’t think I have ever really witnessed something like what happened at Thanksgiving yesterday.

Alice has always been hyper, overly excitable. But I have never seen her as exited about something as she was today, as she was to meet Bella.

I had offered to give Bella a lift to Esme’s, but she had declined, saying she would prefer to drive. I understood that she was still nervous about going to a stranger’s house for the holiday, so driving would probably calm her down, give her a means of escape if she needed it. It gave her a measure of independence, making her not tied to me, having to wait until I was ready to leave.

Alice was practically vibrating with excitement, and in a rare move for her, simply handed me the keys to her car. I had never seen her do that before. I mean, we were obviously taking her car because she hated going on my bike, claiming it ruined either her outfit or messed up her hair. Or both. But, with the exception of long car trips, Alice always drove. I wondered what was on her
mind to make her so excited, so willing to let me drive her baby.

We got to Esme’s early, and were quickly put to work, setting the table, putting the finishing touches on dishes, ensuring that a multitude of different things were perfect. Esme and Rosalie had pulled Alice into the kitchen, leaving Emmett, Carlisle, Edward and myself in the living room, with strict instructions to leave them alone, that they were having ‘girl time.’

I don’t know what they did in their ‘girl time,’ and I don’t think I really want to. But, when they emerged from the kitchen half an hour later, I was relieved to see that Alice was calmer, that she was no longer vibrating in excitement.

Barely minutes after the girls reappeared, the doorbell rang. Bella was the only one not yet at the house, so I knew it must be her. Before I even stood up to answer the door, Alice had managed to answer it.

I walked up behind my sister, looking at Bella over Alice’s head. The thirteen inch difference between our heights sometimes came in handy.

I was floored by what I saw.

You know how in movies there is always that moment when the two love interests meet, their eyes locking until there is no one else in the room? (Don’t judge me, Alice drags me to go see them, claiming that it is too depressing to go to movies alone).

Well, I felt like I was intruding on that moment between my sister and Bella.

I had known that my sister was a lesbian for as long as I can remember. I don’t think she even experimented with boys in middle or high school, instead seeking out girls that were curious, or who she thought were confused. She was never wrong, and she guided the transition of at least six girls into the world of lesbianism or bisexualism.

But I had never, ever seen her like this.

Carefully stepping around Alice, but being careful not to block their eye contact, I took the pies out of Bella’s hands. She didn’t even seem to notice the weight being removed. I slowly backed away from them, sure neither was even aware of my presence. I took the pies into the kitchen, and Esme
placed them somewhere in her cavernous refrigerator. Darting into the dining room, and in a move that stunned even me, I quickly switched Esme’s carefully calligraphied name plates, moving Alice to sit next to Bella, placing myself in the seat Alice had been destined for.

After what seemed like forever, Bella and Alice made it into the living room. They were talking quietly, and Bella seemed surprised when I touched her arm, introducing her to the room. My duties completed, and sensing that Bella was safe with my sister, I withdrew, returning to talk to Emmett and Carlisle. Edward, bored with all this, had moved to play with the few toys Esme had allowed him to keep out. From previous visits, I knew that Edward had far more toys, but Esme took great pride in her house, and would have packed them all away for the holiday.

The evening flowed easily, and each time I glanced across at Bella and Alice, they seemed locked in conversation, completely focused on each other, forgetting about the world around them.

When Esme served Bella’s pies, I saw her eyes widen in surprise. I don’t think she remembered me taking them from her hands, and I could see her mind working, trying to figure it out. Eventually she just shook her head, the action seeming to signal that she cleared her head, wasn’t thinking about it any more. Bella’s pies were perfect, not too sweet like some, but just the right balance of sweet and spicy.

As the conversation wound down, Edward started to droop, and Carlisle rose, lifting the sleepy boy, and taking him to bed. Esme ushered the rest of us into the living room, and we sat in her amazingly comfy sofas and armchairs, sipping coffee and talking quietly. What could have been hours, or perhaps minutes later, I felt myself begin to fade, and knew that I probably needed to go home.

I slowly made my way towards Alice, still locked in conversation with Bella. Before I could even open my mouth, Bella handed me her car keys.

“Alice will drive me home, I think I’ve had a bit too much to drink to be able to drive. Can you drive my truck? Be nice to it. I know it’s a bit of a beast, but I love it. I’ll pick it up from your apartment some time over the weekend?”

I nodded, taking the keys and farewelled my sister, Esme and her family. I knew Alice had basically not had anything to drink that night, knowing that she had to drive home. As I drove Bella’s ancient truck, I pondered the developments of the evening.

As tired as I was, I didn’t get to sleep until well after midnight. I didn’t hear Alice come home, so she must have gotten home much later than that, once I had been asleep for a few hours. Any
earlier and she would have woken me up.

I woke up this morning to the smell of bacon, hash browns and french toast. Alice’s ‘happy breakfast.’ She was all jittery and glowy, dancing around the kitchen as she cooked, singing along to her music.

I blinked in the bright light, and glanced at the clock. It was just after 10am, and I didn’t know how Alice was up and functioning already. Although, that wasn’t anything unusual. She had always been a morning person, while I am most definitely a night owl.

“Perfect timing, Jazzy! Breakfast?”

Nodding, I sat down as Alice started dishing up our breakfasts. As she twirled, putting the fry pan in the sink, she started talking, faster than she had in a long time.

“Oh, Jazz, she is perfect! Thank you so much for convincing her to come last night! I mean, I think we hit it off, I think that she likes me. I totally like her. I’ve found my one and only, my soul mate. She has such a beautiful, kind soul, I don’t know why her parents kicked her out. I mean, she is beautiful, selfless, perfect. Don’t you think? Once you’ve eaten, you have to get dressed. And shower. She’s coming over at twelve to pick up her truck, then we are going shopping. I wanted to go first thing, but she wouldn’t let me.”

With the last sentence, Alice pouted. I blinked, processing Alice’s early morning hyperactivity.

“Alice, talk slower. I don’t know how you do it so early in the morning. Especially when you got less sleep than I did. Let me eat.”

“Sure, grumpy pants. You know you love me, even in the mornings. And, because you love me, I told Bella we would cook dinner for her tonight, after we get back from the sales. So, because you love me, will you have something ready when we get home?” She batted her eyelids at me, knowing that after breakfast, and with the puppy dog eyes, there was no way I could say no.

“Sure, Alice. Just ring me when you leave the mall, so I know when you’re going to be home.”

Smiling, she went back to her food.
“Wait, what? What do you mean, Bella’s parents kicked her out!?” My brain had finally caught up, and processed what Alice had said earlier.

“Her parents kicked her out of home. That’s why she transferred, that’s why she’s here.”

I was shocked, stunned that anyone could do that, let alone to Bella.

“Alice, why?”

“It’s not my story to tell. She said she would tell you, when she was ready.”

“But, why did she tell you?”

“Weren’t you listening? She is my soul mate, we are meant for each other.” Alice nodded her head emphatically, as if that explained it.

I finished my breakfast, and, as Alice requested, showered and dressed. Over the course of our conversations so far, I knew that Bella didn’t eat red meat, and that she was happy eating vegetarian, but also ate chicken and fish. That suited me, and I I mentally began to prepare the dinner in my head.

I was still trying to wrap my head around the idea that anyone could kick Bella out of their house when she arrived. She gave me a quick hug before turning to my sister.

“So, what horrors are you subjecting me to today, Alice? I really meant it when I said I hate shopping.”

“Don’t worry, I shop in style. Through my connections with In Love Designs, I have really good relationships with most of the stores near here. They will hold everything we purchase for us, and I have already got quite a few pieces on hold for when I come in. Most of them put things aside for me when they get new stock, so I rarely have to go through the drudgery of sorting through the racks. And, I think I know the perfect store for you, where we can get you a whole new wardrobe, all in the one place!”
Bella did not look happy at the thought of a day shopping. “Alice, I’m happy with my current wardrobe. I like my clothes. I don’t need anything else.”

“Bella, you just moved here from Jacksonville. In Florida. To Seattle. You can’t have an appropriate wardrobe. I mean, that is probably your warmest outfit, right?” Bella blushed, confirming Alice’s suspicions. “You need a Seattle wardrobe. So, I can take you shopping, and you get a say in what you wear, or I can go by myself, and you get no say.”

I could see the sparkle in my sister’s eyes, and knew she was teasing Bella. Bella sighed, and agreed.

“Don’t worry, Bella,” I said. “Shopping with Alice isn’t as bad as it could be. When you need a break, just tell her. And, when you get back here, I’ll have dinner all ready for the three of us. Just checking, you’re not allergic to anything, right?”

She shook her head, and left with Alice.

I figured I had at least five hours before they returned, but checked that I had everything I needed for dinner.

I planned to make strange flavors, fish parcels with vermicelli, and sesame pak choi. Simple food that tasted amazing.

I put the eggplants on to roast, and pottered about the house. I was amazed how quickly Alice and Bella had bonded. And happy. My sister was happier this morning than she had been for as long as I could remember.

Dinner was fun, and I loved seeing Bella open up, seeing her so relaxed around Alice and me. I had a feeling that she was going to be a part of our lives for a long time to come. If I had Alice’s knack of predicting the future, I would say that she and Alice were in the beginning of a life long relationship, but I had never had Alice’s certainty about the future.

*December 13, 2011*
Over the weeks after Thanksgiving, Bella slowly began to open up to me about her past. Her parents had moved a lot as she was growing up, her mother, Renee flighty and her father, Charlie so goo-goo eyed, he would follow his wife anywhere. They were strict Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Bella had been careful to hide her sexuality as she was growing up. She dated the same boy, James, for most of high school, and her first three years of college. After six years in a relationship with him, pretending that it was working, pretending that she loved him, and was attracted to him, she had finally had enough. She was days away from breaking up with.

The day before she was going to break up with him, he surprised her, arriving at the bookshop she worked at half way through her shift, asking her to come to lunch with him. Her boss seemed to be in on it, ushering Bella out to lunch, giving her knowing looks, saying that she didn’t have to come back in that afternoon, that she understood if she wanted to take the rest of the day off. She wouldn’t even dock her pay.

Bella, highly confused, had followed James, to a nearby restaurant. Her parents, and James’ were sitting at a table that he guided her to. She said that her heart started sinking, seeing both sets of parents. James, and his parents were also Witnesses, and she knew how traditional some of their beliefs were.

James sat her down, for once playing the part of the gentleman, pulling her chair out for her, making sure her water was full. The things she wished he did just because, not because there was an audience. He ordered for her, which could have been sweet, but instead annoyed her. He knew she didn’t like red meat, and yet insisted on ordering a steak for her, claiming that whatever he ordered, she would only eat half of it anyway. So, it may as well be something that he liked, something that he would enjoy finishing.

Bella said her heart sank at that moment, it was the final straw in a large pile of reasons that she and James were just not right together. It just confirmed what she already knew, gave her the final resolve to do what she knew was right. She had to end it. But, that in front of both sets of parents was not the right place. She had a day off the next day, and decided she would do it then.

Until desert came. Once again, James had ordered for her, choosing something that she would eat, but that she wouldn’t enjoy as much as other things on the menu. His choice, banana foster, was innocuous enough, but she would have preferred a chocolate fudge brownie sundae. When the desert came out, it was topped with a ring. Looking at the ring, she knew it was far less than she knew James could afford, and not her tastes at all. She wondered if it reflected the worth he felt she held. He had chosen rose gold, something she never wore, with a stone that stuck out. Despite knowing she would want something less ostentatious, something that didn’t stick out from her finger so much, he had gotten a single big stone. She knew that for the right person, it would be beautiful, but wasn’t beautiful to her.

As she looked across at him in horror, she said she was shocked when she realized he hadn’t even
moved from the seat to propose, hadn’t gotten down on one knee or anything. It was the breaking point for her, and she shook her head at him, screaming no.

She said she ran from the restaurant, and by the time she reached her work, where she had parked her car, tears were running down her face. She was sick of living the lie, sick of pretending to be something she wasn’t just because of her parent’s religious beliefs. Beliefs that she didn’t share.

She didn’t know how long she sat in her truck, sobbing, but no one came to look for her. Eventually, when she felt she couldn’t cry any more, she drove home, to the place she still shared with her parents. Although, as she kept telling herself on the way home, it was only for one more year. Then, she would have finished her degree, and could move far away from them and their crazy ways. She had stayed when she started college, because of James, and because she was tired from all the moves during her childhood. The six years they had been in Jacksonville were the longest they had lived anywhere, ever.

When she got home, there was no one waiting for her. There was a note on the kitchen table telling her to call James, that he was very upset, but realized that it must have been a surprise, that she was surprised by his proposal, and he would take her back when she called him. Her parents were out, and she screamed in frustration.

So, she did the only thing she could think of. She started packing her bags. Her parents were probably out doing missionary work, trying to convert more followers. They usually did that in the afternoon. Every afternoon, actually. She glanced at a clock, and registered it was just after 3:30pm. She figured that she had just over three hours to herself, before her parents arrived back. She threw all her clothing in big garbage bags, hauling them down the stairs to her truck. Looking about her room, she said she knew she couldn’t take most of the stuff with her. There was no way that she could move the bed, or desk, or any of the furniture by herself. Instead, she grabbed the bedding, shoving it in another garbage bag, and into the bed of her truck. She packed her laptop into its case, putting it into the cabin of the truck. Looking at the books, she found several boxes in the cellar, and shoved as many in as she could, moving the boxes into her truck. After just seventy minutes, she surveyed her room. There was nothing left with any sentimental value, nothing she would want when she left. She just wanted to be as far away from all of them as possible. Everything she packed was hers, purchased with her own money. Everything her parents had purchased for her, that James had bought, stayed in the room. She didn’t want any of it. And, she didn’t want them to be used as bargaining chips.

Gathering her courage, she rang the admissions office at University of Washington. She couldn’t think of an American college further away, short of going to Alaska or Hawaii. She said she was lucky, and that a lovely, motherly old lady, Mrs Cope, answered her call, and gave her all the information she would need to transfer. Bella said she asked if the process could be started over the phone, and the Mrs cope kindly said it could. By the time Bella got off the phone forty minutes later, her application for transfer was underway. The only step left was Jacksonville releasing her transcripts, and her meeting the transfer entry requirements.
Knowing she had just over an hour before her parents would be home, she called James. He was at her house in ten minutes, so she knew he had been waiting somewhere nearby, smug in his assumption that she would ring him back, begging for his forgiveness.

Instead, when he arrived, she said she got angry. She spent the next half hour yelling at him in the front yard, listing every single thing that he had done that she didn’t like, that he had done that hurt or diminished her. She said that even after her tirade, James didn’t seem deterred, and simply asked “Yeah, but do you want to marry me or not?”

She said that she then started yelling, again, swearing at him (something she claimed never to have done). “I don’t fucking love you James! I realized today that I can’t stand you, and never want to see you fucking face again. You belittle me every mother fucking day, and I’m sick of it. I don’t want to marry you, you fucking thick, obnoxious, chauvinistic, asshole!”

He had grinned, claiming that she would come around, that she would never get anyone as good as him. He was the best man she was ever going to get. She was going to spend the rest of her life kicking herself for not agreeing to marry the best man she would ever get.

She was so focused on her rage towards James, she didn’t see the car driving up, her parents parking and getting out, walking up behind her.

“I don’t want to marry you James! I won’t ever want to marry you, you smug bastard. And, just for the record, you are not the best man I will ever get. You are the last man I ever want. And, I never wanted you. You were just the easiest option, the path of least resistance. I don’t love you, I never did! I never will! I was with you because it was easy, and because it was expected of me. You were my fucking way of keeping up bloody appearances, around your parents and my own. Because, none of them would accept the truth.

“I’m a fucking lesbian James. And no, that doesn’t mean that I just need a good fucking from a man to get me to change my mind, it means that I am not interested in fucking men.”

She said her parents made their presence known then.

“Isabella,” her mother started, “you are not a lesbian. You are just confused. Jehovah’s Witnesses are not homosexual. Accept James’s marriage proposal, it’s the best you are ever going to get. And stop making such a scene in our driveway!”
“No, Renee, I will not accept James’s proposal. Because it was so romantic and all. And I’m glad to hear that you all thing so highly of me that you think he is the best I can ever do. Someone who I am going through the motions with, who I am repulsed by when he kisses me, all wet and slobbery, is not the best I can do. Someone who couldn’t even order me a fucking desert that I liked to go under the god awful ring he gave me. Someone who can’t even remember that I don’t wear gold. So no, mother, I am not going to accept. And yes, despite what your stupid religion says, I am a lesbian. I love women. I had the biggest crush on the head cheerleader, all through high school.”

Bella said that as she finished that little speech, her father’s face had gone an interesting shade of purple. “ENOUGH!!! No daughter of mine is a lesbian. They are wrong, dirty, corrupt, and will never feel god’s love. I forbid it, Isabella Marie Swan!”

“Oh, you forbid it, do you Charlie? Something that I have suppressed to seem “normal” to you for my entire life, something natural, that I can’t change, you forbid me to feel? Very rich.”

“Isabella, if you come to your senses in the next five seconds, we will forget any of this ever happened. But, if you don’t stop this nonsense right now, and marry James, you will not be welcome in this house.”

“FINE! ‘BYE!’”

“Isabella, you have thirty minutes to get your stuff, and leave! Through your own stupidity, and inability to follow simple doctrine, you are no longer my daughter, no longer part of this family. You are no longer welcome in this house, ever!”

“FINE! I’m already packed. I’m getting the fuck out of here.”

She said she drove for six hours, putting as much distance between herself and her parents and James. Around midnight, she found a roadside hotel, and checked in for the night. She drove the same way for the next five days, covering the three thousand miles between Jacksonville and Seattle with about ten hours driving a day. She said it took her ten days to find accommodation, and a further week to find a job. The day after leaving Jacksonville, she rang to quit her job, and was amazed when her boss still offered to be listed as a reference. She rang the UW admissions office daily, in each conversation making sure to speak to Mrs Cope. Her transfer admission was finalized by the time she arrived in Seattle. By the time she was set up in Seattle, she only had two weeks until school started again for the year, and she was still reeling from her split from her family, from James, and from finally admitting her sexuality.
Listening to her story, I began to fully understand just why she had the deer-caught-on-the-trail look when I first met her, when I asked her if she was going home for the holidays.

By the time she finished talking, I was floored. She was so together, so well adjusted, and as she started spending more and more time with Alice, she was becoming happier, the scared deer look disappearing from her eyes.

January 1, 2011

Alice finally asked Bella out officially last night. She said she wanted her midnight kiss, and that Bella was the one for her.

Alice had, in a manner that was very uncharacteristic for her, not made a move since Thanksgiving, instead involving Bella in our lives, easing her into the world that was Alice wanted her to inhabit for the rest of their lives.

Alice and Bella were glowing this morning, and I know that Bella had spent the night. While, in the last few months Bella had slept in the guest room when she stayed over, she had slept in Alice’s room.

They were happy, and together, and Bella was well on her way to being whole again.

June 8, 2011

Today was Bella and my graduation. We had finished our degrees, and had to start our real lives. Or, had to plan what we were going to do next.

Bella had decided to pursue a literary career, writing and publishing. I, on the other had, had decided to keep studying, returning to school and doing my Masters in Architecture.

Bella had only signed a short lease on her apartment, which ran out a week after graduation. Alice and Bella had approached me maybe a month ago, acting like the gruesome twosome, and asked me to think about the possibility of Bella moving in with us. I honestly didn’t have to think about it. This year had made Bella one of my best friends, and thanks to her relationship with Alice, she
felt more like a sister than a friend.

Of course, I didn’t have to think. I agreed on the spot.

June 14, 2011

Today, we moved the last of Bella’s stuff into our apartment. She had tried to help us with rent, and was shocked when she found the apartment was ours. Bella said that it made her feel guilty not to contribute. Like she was a kept woman or something. And she didn’t leave her parents, her family and stable life to be a kept woman. So, she settled for cooking for us. Her cooking skills are amazing, far surpassing anything Alice or I could do. We, of course, readily agreed.

And with that, I was living with my sister and her girlfriend.
In celebration of the film that Alice had just completed costumes for, and Bella and my graduation, the three of us went on a short holiday. A week away from the city. Neither girl had wanted to fly anywhere, and both wanted to be near the water, so we settled on a small town on the Olympic Peninsula. We stayed in the one and only hotel in the small, seaside village of La Push. It was peaceful, even if it did rain four of the seven days we were there. The locals were friendly, if not a touch frightening. I stand at a comfortable six feet, and most of the men in the town towered over me.

17 October, 2013

Today was the release of Bella’s first book. Bella is amazing, and I am so glad that she is in Alice and my life.

Bella and I graduated almost eighteen months ago now, and our lives have gone in very different directions.

I chose to continue studying, to pursue my love of architecture.

Bella, on the other hand, decided that she had already found her love, her passion. She loved reading, and writing. As her final project for one of her literature classes, she had written a series of short stories about a group of vegetarian vampires. Shortly after moving in with Alice and I, Bella decided that she wanted to pursue her writing. She explained the pleasure she got from writing, from crafting stories and creating worlds. Both Alice and I had encouraged her, pushed her to continue to write. I wanted to see her eyes sparkle the way they did when she talked about writing, about the universes that she created. And Alice would do anything to make Bella happy.
So, two months after moving in with us, Bella quit her reception job, and began to focus all of her energy on writing her first novel. Her arrangement to cook for us, in lieu of paying rent continued. I know that Bella felt even more guilty about this arrangement after quitting her job, but Alice and I didn’t mind. The apartment was ours, and we had still barely touched or parent’s life insurance. My college fund had covered my degree, and was also covering my Masters tuition costs. We were comfortable, and happy.

Somehow, Alice had convinced Bella that staying at home and writing fully constituted a job, even though it wasn’t paying anything yet. Alice managed to get Bella to agree that this was her passion, and that it was what she wanted. And, that she was not a kept person, but a fully contributing member of the household. The meals she cooked were amazing.

Bella seemed to fall easily into the routine of writing. She was usually up and writing when I left for school in the morning, sitting in the library we… well, Alice created for her. I would take her a cup of something to drink - tea, hot chocolate, juice, but never coffee - and leave for my day. Alice would often come home for lunch, and she and Bella would sit and talk for an hour, before Alice went back to work and Bella returned to the study.

Six months after she moved in with us, Bella had completed the manuscript to her first book.

She and Alice, in celebration of finishing the manuscript, took a ten day vacation, leaving me to my own devices. Part of me reveled in the silence of the house, the freedom of having a space totally to myself. I walked around naked, left my clothing and shoes out, basically turned into a complete slob. But, my unknown reader, the truth is I was lonely. I missed my sister’s energy, Bella’s quiet companionship. I missed the sounds of people in the apartment.

The one thing I didn’t miss, however, was the sounds of them going at it. I swear, neither girl slept. Ever. It didn’t matter what time I got in, about half an hour after my door was closed, I would begin to hear the sounds of my two best friends trying to be quiet. It takes them no longer than fifteen minutes to give up on that. And then, I can hear everything.

Bella and Alice are screamers.

So, three days into their holidays, I started looking at apartments. I didn’t want to move out of the area, it suited us all so well. And I didn’t want to live on my own. I just wanted more distance between their room and mine.

Neither Alice or I had touched the money that we were getting from the rent of the Texas house. The same tenants lived there as when we first rented it. Alice had visited them a year or so ago,
and they seemed content to keep living there. She had connected with them, so actually lowered their rent, and they signed a contract where we agreed to raise the rent by no more than four percent each year. Basically, they were getting the house way under market value. But, neither of us minded. And Alice had said that the kids were lovely, that the parents loved the area and the school, and that we would probably have tenants until Sally, the youngest, finished school. She’s due to start kindergarten next year.

I had checked the money in the rent account, and it was enough to put a deposit on a larger apartment. I met with a financial planner, and, given the down payment we have, the rent we could ask on the current apartment would easily cover our mortgage for a larger apartment. I had set a limit of one and a half million on the cost of the new apartment, and it had to have at least three bedrooms, and preferably was two floors. I know, not asking much or anything.

I was amazed. It took me three days to find the perfect place. It was one million, four hundred and fifty thousand dollars, four bedroom, three bathroom, and had an amazing view over the water. It was a little further away from university that we had lived before, but close enough that I would have to spend no more than twenty five minutes on public transport each day, and Alice would spend no more than twenty to get to In Love Designs. Bella didn’t really have to worry about transportation, so that wasn’t an issue.

Best of all, there were two bedrooms upstairs, and two downstairs. It was a penthouse apartment, so here was an amazing balcony area where we could sit when it wasn’t raining, and we had access to the roof. The agent showing the property said that there were three pent house apartments that had rooftop access, so it wouldn’t be solely ours, but that the owners had told her that it was unusual to see the other people up here. Or at all.

Feeling apprehensive and excited, I put an offer down for the apartment. Mainly, it was to secure our place in the queue. I really liked this place. Alice and Bella would be home in two days, and if they liked the apartment, then we would confirm our offer. The estate agent I talked to seemed to think that the two day delay on confirming the offer wouldn’t hurt my chances of getting the apartment.

So, I was almost pulling an Alice when I collected her and Bella from the airport two days later. I felt like I would vibrate out of my skin in excitement. Their flight had gotten in just after midday, and I had arranged a 3 o’clock viewing. My fingers were both literally and metaphorically crossed with excitement.

As we stepped into the lobby of the apartment building, I was greeted by the smiling face of the real estate agent. Sophia, I think her name was. I smiled, and ushered Bella and Alice into the lift. Part of me felt like I should have blindfolded them, but that seemed like it was going a bit over the top.
Sophia opened the door for us, and waited as we walked inside.

Drawing a deep breath, I turned to Bella and Alice.

“Do you like it? I love you guys, but I’m tired of hearing your sexcapades every night. Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for you both, that you’re both happy and getting some, but we really need a bigger place. I fell in love with this the moment I saw it. There is a beautiful view of the water, and four bedrooms, and a balcony, and I want to start a rooftop garden, and one of the bedrooms can be Bella’s study, and another can be your closet Alice, and with the rent from both the house and the apartment, we can totally afford it…” I trailed off, finally looking at the two women in front of me.

“Silly boy, let us have a look around, and then we’ll tell you.”

I sat on the kitchen stool, letting the girls wander around the rooms. Not only were there more rooms, but it was bigger. I was so lost in my own thoughts, I didn’t hear Alice shrieking as she bounded down the stairs. I did feel her launch herself onto my body, the force of her attack knocking the air out of my lungs.

“Eee! It’s amazing, Jasper! When can we move in? Can Bella and I have the top bedrooms? Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes, we’ll love you forever!”

Smiling down at her, I saw Bella walk up. “It’s beautiful Jasper. I know we would all love living here. But are you sure it’s okay? I mean, me living her with you and all? I don’t really contribute…” She looked down, the insecurities playing across her face.

Putting Alice down, I carefully drew Bella into a tight hug. “Of course it’s okay. You’re family. And who knows, that book might sell millions of copies, and then you’ll be richer than Alice and I combined!” She tipped her head back as a loosened my arms, and I saw her watery smile. As Alice wrapped her body around Bella from behind, encasing her in a Whitlock sandwich, I knew we had won.

A month later, papers were signed, money was exchanged, and we were the proud new owners of the beautiful water view apartment. Despite my wish for a rooftop garden, I figured that winter was the wrong time to start it, so I settled for ogling rooftop gardens around the world online.

Bella threw herself into writing, or editing - holing herself up in her office, at any rate - and, three
months after we moved in, she had a manuscript she felt comfortable sending to publishers.

Alice and Bella, I’m sure, continued their nocturnal activities after we moved, but I no longer heard them. I was exceedingly grateful for that.

The night before she sent the books to publishers for the first time, Bella sat Alice and I down and told us a bit more of her story.

“So, I told you that my parents were crazy religious, right?” she started. “Well, they have kinda got their own ideas about several things, ideas that are not exactly part of the normal Jehovah’s Witness ideology. Particularly their ideas about tithing almost all of your money to the church. My parents were seen as exemplary citizens within the local congregation, because they gave almost all of their money to the church. Which meant that despite their comfortable incomes, we always lived very frugally. It was, I dunno, normal to me for so long. It’s also one of the reasons that it makes me so uncomfortable when you spend money on me, so uncomfortable living with you without contributing. You live in such luxury compared to what I’m used to. I worked my ass off, mostly to pay for college and my truck, for the entire time I lived with them. College was the only reasonable excuse for not giving the money to the church they would accept. That, and I was still a ‘minor’ in their eyes. They expected me to start donating to the church regularly as soon as I hit majority, as soon as I turned twenty-one. They were… are still probably… crazy, religious freaks.

“So, anyway, they haven’t made any effort to contact me since I left. My email address, my cell number are the same. It’s not hard to contact me. And yet, unsurprisingly, really, nothing. But, I am sure that if my book gets published, they will start hounding me to tithe, despite the fact that they disowned me, and that I haven’t heard from them since I drove away from their front lawn that night.

“Which means, I want to use a pen name to publish my books.” She picked up the paper in front of her. “These are the names I’ve shortlisted.” She handed the paper to Alice.

I bent to see the names written on the paper Alice was holding.

Mary Torres
Stephanie Meyer
Gloria Martens
Helen Lewis
Anna Zammit
Alice and I spoke at once. “Stephanie Meyer.” We dissolved into laughter, realizing we both chose the same name as Bella’s pen name.

“Stephanie Meyer it is,” she said, smirking at us.

Bella sent her novels out to thirty publish houses and agents the next day.

Three months later, Bella still hadn’t received a response from any of the people she had sent her manuscript to. She planned to give it one more week, then she would start the process of ringing and sending the manuscript again.

Four days later, the ‘Stephanie’ phone rang. In keeping with the pen name, Bella had set up a pre paid cell phone, and a hotmail address as Stephanie, so that she wouldn’t answer the phone as the wrong person.

I had wandered into the study where Bella was working, to give her lunch. I had no classes on a Wednesday, so I tended to stay home and study here. As I walked into the room, the Stephanie phone rang and Bella jumped nearly a foot into the air. I quietly set the plate down beside her, and sat in the big plushy chair she kept in the study. It was strange hearing the one sided conversation, but I didn’t want to disturb her.

“Hello?” she tentatively started.

“Hello Sara, it’s wonderful to hear from you.”

“You did? You would? Oh, wonderful. Little, Brown was my top choice.”

“No, I know I didn’t include an bio.”

“Right, I know I need one. Well, If you want to sign me, I guess you need the truth. My name is Isabella Swan. But, please call me Bella. Stephanie Meyer is a pen name.”
Bella went on to explain her situation, and her wish to remain anonymous.

“Yes, yes, I understand that there are usually promotional responsibilities. I was wondering if hiring an actor would be appropriate?”

“I see. That sounds wonderful.”

“Yes, I’m based in Seattle. No, New York is fine. One week Monday? That’s fine.”

“I will have to check.”

“You have my email address, please send all the information there.”

“What’s your number? Got it. I’ll call you when I know.”

“ Wonderful, Sara. Looking forward to seeing you too.”

Bella hung up the phone, and leaned back in her chair.

“Bella?” I asked quietly. She spun around in her chair, her eyes wide with excitement. Or, fear, maybe.

“They are going to sign me, Jasper! Sara, the woman I just spoke to, said she is going to fly me to New York in like, a week to go through all the paperwork. I mean, they were my top pick, but I never thought I would actually get signed with them. Oh my god, I need to call Alice!” Reaching into her pocket, she grabbed her personal phone. Holding it to her ear, I could see her eyes unfocus as Alice answered the phone, clearly picturing my sister and no longer seeing the room in front of her.

“Alice, guess what? I got signed! Little, Brown signed me! Are you able to get a week off work starting Monday week? They want me to fly to New York. Will you come with me? I need your support.”
I heard my sister’s squeal of excitement from where I was sitting, across the room from Bella.

“See you soon.”

Her eyes focused on me again, flushed and excited.

Standing, I took her hand and pulled her to her feet. “I think this calls for a celebration. Zen Yai or My’s?”

Bella deliberated, before deciding on My’s. Vietnamese Malaysian it was.

A little over a week later, Bella and Alice were flying over to New York to meet Sara. It turned out that Sara was Bella’s editor. Apparently, one of the main reasons that she wanted to fly Bella out was because of the pen name thing. After a week of discussions, they came to a decision. The books would be published under a pen name, and an actress would be hired to do conferences, interviews and so on. Basically all the PR stuff.

And so, a very quiet search of the country began. In the end, they found a mother of three, living down in Phoenix, who was perfect.

Jessica Stanley, a stay at home mother of three, happily (and quite gladly Alice said) agreed to be the ‘face’ of the Twilight novel. Of Bella’s first book. She agreed to be Stephanie Meyer, and to attend interviews and any press things in Bella’s place. Bella gave her free reign over the back story of how the stories came to be written, and was delighted when, after reading the book, Jessica suggested that she had a dream of the couple on the meadow, the conversation in chapter thirteen.

Jessica had her picture taken for the bio to go in the book, and suddenly, the book was in press, and had a release date. True facts about her life were woven into the fiction of ‘Stephanie Meyer’ to create a believable bio. It was perfect.

Today, six months later, we had flown to Phoenix for a few days, to attend the release party held for ‘Stephanie.’ Bella quietly watched the people coming and going, and watched Jessica flirt and chat with everyone who came her way. Really, we couldn’t have picked a better person to act as a buffer for Bella.

18 October, 2013
We went to Jessica’s house for dinner, I began to realize how perfect she was for the job. She had known almost no one at the party, and yet, she had talked to everyone, and handed Bella a stack of business cards. “I have no need for these,” she explained. “I’m a happy stay at home mom, with commitments with your publishing company for interviews and the like. I’m not a writer, and the books are yours anyway. I like the thrill of the secret here. And, hey, where else was I going to use the acting skills from my theatre major?”

Smiling, she got up, returning with yet more food. “Plus, with the money y’all are paying me to do this, I don’t need to go back to work for a while. Mike doesn’t mind the extra cash either,” she said wickedly, winking at him over the table. The look of adoration on his face was beautiful, and I suddenly understood why these two had three kids under the age of four. They both clearly loved each other, and weren’t shy about expressing it.

Dinner was pleasant. Jessica was an amazing cook. We chatted until the kids started to get grumpy, when we carefully excused ourselves. We had an early morning flight, and Alice was the only one of us who could really be called a morning person.
I’m glad that I had decide on architecture. I really do enjoy it, and I am loving the classes I am taking this semester. I mean, I know that most of the classes I took last year, the classes that give me the fundamentals were basic, entry level courses to ease us in. But still, they made it clear to me that I made the right choice in pursuing architecture.

Except, now, I get the one teacher that makes every architecture student's life a living nightmare. More than three quarters of her class fails. Every year. It’s offered as a summer course with a different teacher, and most of them pass it then… the university knows about her, but doesn’t feel the need to change it.

Oh, right… The course is taught by Dr Bitch. Or, Dr Jane Volturi, as her PhD would read. She’s sadistic and ruthless and meticulous and seems to get an extraordinary amount of pleasure from causing us pain. And by us, I mean the students. She’s a perfectionist, and unrelenting, both in her own work, and in ours. The university keeps her because she is tenured, and honestly, is brilliant. I’ve read some of her papers, seen her designs - I mean, she has designed just about every single thing you could conceive from little cottages, to eco dwellings, to skyscrapers to stadiums and amazing theatre complexes. If she didn’t scare me so much, I would love to work for her firm one day. Volutri Architecture. I mean, she is a pioneer. Her firm started in her back shed, and is now employs more than two hundred people. It’s still Seattle based, but they do work everywhere. And there are another hundred people employed in the sibling firm, ALEC - Architecture Leading Environmental Change. Most of the work is done based on charity donations, or on a pro bono basis. She foots the majority of the bills herself. From the profits from Volturi Architecture. There are no shareholders in Volturi Architecture. It barely makes any profits. Most of the money it makes goes to paying salaries (and from what I’ve heard, they are very nice salaries, even for those just starting out) and the rest goes to ALEC. Apparently Jane doesn’t even pay herself a salary. She just has herself on the medical insurance and those sort of benefits, and her living expenses are covered by the small amount she is paid by the university.

I might have read her biography… maybe. I’m not sure if it helped, or just left me intimidated.
October 15, 2012

My first assignment for Dr Bitch’s class was due today. I swear I haven't slept in a week. I don’t ever remember working this hard on a class. Or worrying this much that I was going to pass.

October 22, 2012

I passed! Only just - I got 51%. But still, it’s a pass. Dr Bitch refuses to post results online. So, you have to go through the process of going to her office, where there is a sheet of paper tacked to a cork board with everyone’s student numbers, and marks from top to bottom. I was sure that I was going to fail. I almost couldn’t bring myself to look… but I passed! I passed the first of Dr Bitch’s assignments! And, the highest mark was 75, so, I wasn’t even that far off. I’m in the top quarter of the class. Which is worrying. But. I. Passed.

October 30, 2012

So, I may have passed, but that didn’t stop her from calling me into her office to discuss my assignment mark. Apparently she talks to every student who gets below 60. Which, was most of us. I think there were 9 people who got above 60? And there’s over 200 people in the class.

It was probably the weirdest meeting I have ever experienced. She talked. I barely said anything. The meeting went for 15 minutes, and I think I said 50 words. She is terrifying, and yet I was fascinated by everything that she was saying. I have a stack of 15 journal articles to read by Thanksgiving. On top of all of my existing class work. But, weirdly, I want to. It was kinda like having my own, private lecture series. The things I can take home about my work: my ideas were good, but I didn’t push them hard enough. I didn’t reference enough. I didn’t provide enough up to date examples of work relating to my assignment topic. I need to embrace google translate, as most of the new, innovative work isn’t being published in English. Or, it’s being done in non-English speaking countries. I need to get over myself, and look at the reality of living at or below the poverty line. Not everyone has the wealth I have.

And I just sat there and nodded. I wanted to tell her about my parents. I wanted to tell her about Alice and Bella. And I just sat there. Because in many ways she is right. My parents were well off. They had good jobs, and Alice and I never wanted for anything. Even coming here, we haven’t ever had money troubles. I don’t have to worry about student loans, I don’t have to work to get through school. I don’t have to pay rent. I’ve never had to pay rent.

I’ve read two of the articles already. They are amazing. The perspectives are just. I dunno. It makes me want to go and live in some of these places. In slums and rain forests and african tribal
villages. I want to live below the poverty line. Because I don’t understand it.

January 16, 2013

The class is hard. Dr Bitch is even harder. But, I got 65 percent! And, there were only 4 people ahead of me this time!

January 21, 2013

I had another meeting with Dr Jane today. One I asked for. Because I needed her help. There is an environmental architecture project being held over spring break. I think I need to go on it. Partly for me, partly because of what she said to me last time, and partly because it is important. I needed her recommendation for the project. And, I did the talking this time. Which is a great feeling. I feel like I can hold my own with her now.

It was a longer meeting this time. I think I was in her office for half an hour this time. I talked to her about the articles she had given me to read, about the improvement in my marks, and about why I want to go to Mexico. She asked me how my Spanish was, and I have never been so grateful for my parents insisting that I take Spanish at school, or my indecision keeping me learning it throughout college. And we talked about what I want to do, where I want to be as an architect when I graduate. I told her that working for her company would be a dream.

We talked about the next assignment and architectural vampirism. I had read it as a footnote in her biography, and wanted to know more. She seemed either impressed or exasperated that I had read her biography - I never can read her expressions - but I think it was a good thing. Dr Jane has a theory that modern architecture practices is a modern vampirism. It sucks the world dry. It takes, and doesn’t give anything back. To her, environmental architecture is like vegetarian vampirism - there is no way not to impact the world, but this way, the impact is minimized. You use materials and practices that reduce the carbon foot print, the negative environmental aspects of the building.

She gave me the reference.

15 June 2013

Jane requested another meeting with me today. I had absolutely no idea why. I mean, my grades are great - I’m like, second in the class or something like that. Not bad considering I only just passed the first assignment. (And when I say or something, I mean that I am second in the class.
It’s hard to say that as a definitive sentence... It still seems so unreal).

She offered me an internship…

An INTERNSHIP. At ALEC. It’s an amazing opportunity. How could I say no? It means a summer of stupidly hard, unpaid work. But it’s such an amazing opportunity. I’m so excited that I can’t even think of another word for opportunity. And there I go, using it again. A few more times and it won’t mean anything. Opportunity. Opportunity. Opportunity. But really, I get to work for ALEC. And she said that it’s not a coffee and copying internship. It’s a real, you do stuff, you have actual work internship.

2 July 2013

So. Today we got our results. And because they are the university wide, final results, we were able to get them online. It felt a little weird to see them online, and not on the list outside Jane’s office. I did soooo well! I passed, and like, REALLY passed. I got a final mark of 86 percent. I have no idea how that happened. (I’m also so happy that I don’t have to do the subject again).

And I start the internship tomorrow.

15 June 2014

My third year seemed to fly. And it also seemed so much easier than my second year. Possibly because of the course with Jane last year. I didn't realize it then, but oh my god did she teach me good habits. I had to work so hard to pass her course. And to get more than a pass. I got a high distinction. Which I never imagined I would get.

And then I got the internship. And, I learnt so much more. ALEC has the same sort of work ethic that we had shoved down our throats in Jane’s course. Work hard, work smart, and be a perfectionist. And then you will be brilliant, and the work you do will be brilliant. And also, the idea that every little thing counts. I was working with a small team, on prefab buildings. The idea was that these buildings could go into slums in, well, any city in the world. They had to be water tight, well ventilated, have a separate room for bathrooms facilities. They had to be able to be connected to mains power, but also to use another power source - in this case, a car battery. They also have to be solar compatible. They had to be able to be connected to town water, or to water tanks. They also had to be able to sleep at least 6 people off the floor. And, they need to be able to be stacked if needed. They needed to be fire retardant. They need to be able to be connected to a telephone line. All elements need to be pre fabricated, and made cheaply with a variety of materials. It seemed just, an insurmountable task the first day. I started the day they started the
The project went all summer. It was terrifying, and exhilarating. It was exactly what I wanted.

And, I was offered a permanent, part time, one day a week position working on the project. A huge opportunity for someone with as little experience as me. This summer, we will be flying to Mexico City to see the first thousand installed in a small slum. It seems a tiny number, but they will house a total of five thousand people. The government agreed to install infrastructure to have them properly wired to mains electricity, and all occupants will be able to buy electricity at cost price plus 2 percent. They have also provided access to piped water to improve sanitation. It’s a tiny, tiny drop in the ocean for the between five and six million people living in the slums. But, it’s still five thousand people who aren’t living in them any more.

There are plans for another five thousand to be built in the next year. Which means about twenty-five thousand people out of the slums. There is money for more, but there isn’t land. We were luck for the first thousand, and there was a small unused patch of land that we were able to utilize. It has properly paved roads, is linked to the sanitation system, and just such an improvement from where these people were living. The roads allow for fire trucks to access all houses. And ambulances and you know. Vehicles. The five thousand people we have relocated vacated slum housing that has given us the land to build the next five thousand. And, when we move people into their new housing, we will be able to use their vacated land to build more.

I could go on and on. The building projects are creating employment. They are giving people a better quality of life. Better health. Just. It’s amazing.

Jane (I can’t bring myself to call her Dr Bitch anymore) has continued to be my mentor this year. I think I can honestly say she has been the single biggest influence on my educational experience to date. She forced me to think more, deeper, harder, smarter, in directions I had never travelled before. To demand perfection in my work. To demand perfection in myself.

She offered me a full time job today. Well, not a job. She offered me a choice between working for Volturi Architecture and ALEC. She has given me a week to think about it, to decide where I would prefer to work.

I’m not sure that I need a week. But, I want to have a chance to talk to Alice and Bella first.

20 June 2014

I accepted the ALEC job today. I got so much out of the internship and job last ear that I want to be able to keep doing that.
The pay isn’t as high as at Volturi Architecture. It’s a not for profit, so that’s not so surprising. But, Jane makes sure that we all have the same, amazing benefits. And, I just can’t imagine a better job just out of school. Both Bella and Alice basically pushed me to the ALEC job. I mean, I guess they’re right. We don’t need the money. We have the money from Bella’s books, from Alice’s job, from our inheritance, the rent from the other properties… we have it easy financially. So, really the decision shouldn’t have been hard. And it wasn’t.

When I told her I was taking the ALEC job, Jane looked so pleased. She told me that she was glad that I had made that decision, that she hoped that was the way I’d go. And.

It’s a big and.

She said I was one of the best students that she’s ever had. I’m the only one that pulled myself from 51 to 86. If I’d gotten a 59 in the first assignment, I would have topped the class. And.

And.

She wants to mentor my career. She thinks I can do big things.

I hope I do...
Rosalie and Emmett got the most amazing phone call today. After what happened with the IVF treatments, and Emmett’s mother, they finally made the agonizing decision that they weren’t going to try to keep going with IVF. That their children were going to be theirs in every way, except biologically. They also decided against surrogacy. They only had 2 eggs left after all the treatments, and couldn’t face the heartbreak if surrogacy didn’t work.

Instead, the decided that they would adopt. Adoption is crazy, and the testing you have to go through to be accepted as an adoptive parent is intense. We, as their family, were all interviewed and scrutinized. It was uncomfortable, and worrying knowing that we could be the reason that Rosalie and Emmett didn’t get their family like they wanted.

I mean, people who conceive naturally don’t have to do anything like this, and not all of them are fully equipped to be parents like Rose and Emm are.

So, when they were told that they would be placed on the list with the adoption agency, they were overwhelmed with joy. We celebrated with them that night, with a fancy meal and a large bottle of champagne.

Barely two months later, they were contacted saying that a girl was considering them as a potential adoptive family for her child. She was still young, a teenager, and didn’t think she would be capable of raising the baby herself. The adoption agency stressed that they were one of three couples that she was meeting with, and not to get their hopes up. They tried, but I know it was hard to to be too excited about it. The meeting went well, and they left hopeful that they would be chosen.

The next day, they were told that she had chosen them. She was five months pregnant. In four months, they were going to be parents. The mother still had the option of keeping her child. The agency kept stressing that. But it’s the same as the warning labels on medications. We have to tell you all the side effects. The worst case scenario. But the best case is that you get better. Or in this case, that you get a child.
Alice was in seventh heaven with the shopping and decorating that she got to do. Rose, Bella and Esme left her to it, knowing that she was just going to do whatever she wanted either way, and trusting her taste and judgement. In less than a month, the room was perfectly set up for the impending baby, and we were all waiting with bated breath for the day that their baby was born.

Today, the waiting was worth it. The adoption case worker rang saying that their baby had been born, a healthy and hale little girl. They could go and visit her, but were unable to take her home for another few days while the paperwork was finalised.

We’ve all been to the hospital to see her. She is beautiful, mesmerizing and perfect.

The birth mother requested that it was a closed adoption. She is happy for her daughter to contact her, if she wishes once she is sixteen. But she doesn’t want contact before that. She doesn’t want photos, or updates. She doesn’t want to send cards or birthday presents. I get the impression that there is more than just her age going on, but I haven’t met her, so I can’t judge.

Rose and Emm want to name their daughter Olivia, after her birth mother.

31 October 2015

Olivia, at 4 months old has to be the cutest little girl I have ever seen.

Alice is loving having a niece, and the opportunity to spoil her. I think she and Esme almost had a fight about who would make the family’s first costume. Esme won, but it was close. And Alice moped for nearly two weeks.

But, once she saw the costumes Esme came up with, she was placated. Esme made it a whole family thing, but she also made each group able to stand alone. And, she captured something of each of us in the costumes. Of course, she didn’t let us see our costumes until we put them on - not that I was worried about the fit, she’s made us all things before, and this is what she does, after all. But, I wanted to know who I was going to be.

I shouldn’t have worried.
Olivia is tiny, but she’s got so much love inside her. Bigger than her little body should hold. Which Esme obviously took as her cue for the costumes. Little Olivia was dressed as the Tardis, with Emm as the Doctor and Rose as River Song. Esme and Carlisle were, fittingly, Amy and Rory Pond. Alice and Bella were Madame Vastra and Jenny Flint, I had the joy of being Captain Jack Harkness and Edward got to be an Ood. And OH MY!!! I knew that Esme was good, but I didn’t realize she was this good. Well, this was all Esme, and the costumes were truly amazing. Alice and Edward both had amazing prosthetic makeup and we all looked like we had just walked off a film set. We even got asked for autographs a few times.

And Olivia, what a cutie. The little tardis tutu was perfect.

As always, the party at Esme and Carlisle’s was amazing. I can’t imagine a better Halloween tradition than their parties.

26 November 2015

Looking around the table at thanksgiving tonight, and seeing all the couples, and children, and happy families, I realized something.

I want a Family. With a capital ‘F’ and everything. I want the girl, and the children, and the commitment and the love. I want to be up nights, with a crying child. I want to clean dirty diapers. I want to deal with a crazy, hormonal pregnant wife. And a PMSing wife. I want to deal with the good and the bad. I want a Family. And yes, I love my sister and Bella. I love Esme and Carlisle, Edward, and Rose and Emm and little Olivia. But watching Emm tonight, I was totally jealous of him getting to hold, to love her. To be her father.

There is a saying that your first love stays with you forever. And that person isn’t the first person you kiss, or the first person you sleep with. It’s the person that you compare everyone else to. And for me, that person is Lilly. I compare every other girl to her, and none of them have measured up.

I hope someone does, someday.
My unknown reader, I know a secret.

And, you can’t tell anyone, especially not Alice.

Because today, Bella came to ask me for Alice’s hand in marriage.

I was touched that she had thought of me, thought of our background when she asked.

Our parents were close to both Alice and I. They fully supported Alice when she came out to them, at the tender age of 13. She was so strong in her convictions, so sure in herself that they never questioned her, accepting her for who she was, and what she chose.

Bella knew all of this, and knew that one day, I would ask a father for some special girl’s hand in marriage. Or asked to join the family of the person I loved. It was how I operated, how Alice and I had been raised to operate.

So, I was touched when she asked me for my blessing in asking Alice to marry her.

Bella planned this so carefully. Yesterday was their anniversary, four years to the day that Alice had first asked Bella out.
Bella enlisted Rosalie’s help for the day, getting her to take Alice shopping, out of the apartment for the day.

And, while Alice was gone, Bella and I transformed the apartment into a romantic getaway. I was spending the night, well, anywhere but here really. At Esme’s, in reality. Both my sister and Bella were screamers, and I really didn’t want to hear that, at least not tonight. Things had gotten better when we moved into the new apartment and my bedroom was as far away from theirs as possible. On a different floor, even. But still, I didn’t want to be around tonight.

Bella cooked, and I cleaned. Every surface of the apartment was spotless, dust free, perfectly arranged, with not a trace of mess anywhere.

At three o’clock, Bella sent me out, with a list of things to get. First stop was at the florist, to collect the dozen bouquets she had ordered for the day. Then, to a small chocolatier, for the hand made lemon and dark chocolate bites my sister adored. Next, to the local bottle store, for the special sparkling wine she had ordered. And lastly, to the jewelers, for the rings that she had picked out. Each place knew I was coming, and swiftly moved to help me. Or more, to help Bella.

By the time I got home, the house smelt amazing with Bella’s cooking. She explained to me where she wanted each of the bouquets, orchids, tiger lilies, irises, lilacs and wisteria. Each bouquet was unique, and beautiful. Each perfectly complemented Bella’s placement, and I almost forgot that Alice was the visually creative one, not Bella. The smell of the flowers began to waft through the apartment, mingling with the smell of Bella’s cooking.

Alice would think it was perfect.

Rosalie delivered Alice home, as organized, at six pm sharp. As Alice walked in, I gathered her into a hug, kissing the top of her head and wishing her luck. Rosalie drove me to Esme’s, where we were due to attend her New Year’s Eve party. For the first time since moving to Seattle, Alice wouldn’t be at the party. It felt weird to be going to Esme’s without Alice, but I knew her night was going to be magical.

Bella had thought of everything. The meal she prepared was romantic, perfect, and filled with foods that were both Alice and Bella’s favorites. She had chosen to start with baked camembert, served with cranberry sauce and pear. Next, she moved on to Seafood Chowder, before the main meal of Soy and Orange Glazed Salmon with ginger Sautéed vegetables. For dessert, she planned Chocolate fudge brownies, with home made vanilla bean ice cream, and chocolate sauce. I was drooling, just at the thought of the meal Bella had prepared.
Bella had told me what her plans were. After dinner, she planned to move into the living room, which I had cleared to make a dance floor. She had created a playlist to dance to, before they sampled champagne with wild hibiscus flowers and the lemon chocolates.

At five minutes to midnight, Bella planned to propose, so that her midnight kiss would be with her fiancé.

She had it all mapped out, and I knew it was going to be perfect.

Today, I stayed at Esme’s as long as I possibly could, to give Alice and Bella as much time together as I possibly could. I had warned Bella that I was probably going to be home around five pm, but to be on the safe side, I had stayed away until six.

As soon as I walked in the door, I was accosted by my sister.

She was grinning ear to ear, dragging Bella behind her. She waved her left hand at me, showing off her engagement ring. And then pulled Bella forward, and waved Bella’s left hand at me.

Showing me Bella’s engagement ring.

Smiling, and hugging them both, I went to sit in the living room. The story of why both of them had engagement rings on was one I had to hear.

I let them lead me into the living room, accepting the bowl of chowder they placed in my hands. As I began to eat, they began to talk.

Alice started. “I had a feeling that something was up when Rosalie volunteered to go shopping with me today. I mean, she willingly goes if I ask her, but not once before had she volunteered. But, I decided to go with it, because it’s been so long since I have seen her. Olivia, as beautiful as she is, takes up so much of her time.

“So, despite being suspicious of what you two were up to, I went with Rosie. Emmett had Olivia for the day, so I figured that I should just be grateful and go with the flow. The fact that Rosie drove was also a little sus. Normally we just meet at the mall, but yesterday she picked me up. Which, I guess was part of your plan, wasn’t it?” She glanced over to Bella who blushed and nodded, before continuing.
“But, despite all that, I had a really good day with Rosalie. I like my girl time with her. She is so abrupt, so down to earth, so willing to call me on my shit. It’s refreshing, especially after the kiss asses in the stores try to say anything to get a sale.

“We spent the morning clothes shopping, and had planned a spa visit for the afternoon.

“On the way to the spa, we passed a jewelers, one of those proper old fashioned ones that does everything on site, that makes everything a one off. And there, in the display window, was the most perfect engagement ring. Platinum, flat set, diamonds and sapphires. I couldn’t go past without at least looking at it.

“The sales woman was so helpful. She pulled the ring out, and found me a few similar settings, ones that had matching earrings or necklaces, bigger stones or more diamonds. There were a lot of gaudy pieces that she showed me, bigger than you or I would go for. And the one that I saw in the window, the one that drew me into the store, I knew it was perfect. I knew it was perfect for Bella.

“So, I bought it. I made a snap decision, and I was going to propose at midnight. I was still thinking we were going to Esme’s, so I was going to draw Bella out into the garden, under Esme’s big winter jasmine trellis.

“But, of course, I never got the chance, because I got home to all this.” She gestured around the room, with the furniture still pushed back against the walls for the dance floor. “I was intoxicated by the smell when I got back home, entranced. Bella didn’t give me a chance to spy on what was going on, appearing with a blindfold, and whisking me upstairs.

“I was given instructions to change into something sexy, and be back downstairs in half an hour. I felt a little icky from my day in shopping clothes, so I was more than happy to shower, change, and head back downstairs.

“Coming down the stairs, I was greeted with the sight of the living room transformed, and the flowers everywhere. The apartment was so beautiful, it took my breath away. But not nearly as much as Bella did when she stepped out of the kitchen, swaying her hips as she walked into the dining room. I couldn’t see what she was carrying, but I really wanted to know. So, I followed her.

“When she turned around to greet me, properly this time, I was stunned by how beautiful she looked. She had found a deep blue dress, with a heart shaped neckline, fitted bodice and flared skirt. Her skin glowed, the blue accenting the porcelain look she has. She had on a long chain, one
that disappeared into her dress, drawing my eyes downwards, towards her cleavage. The outfit was beautiful. You were beautiful, Bella.

“Like in the living room, she had transformed the dining room, with flowers and music and lighting. I felt like I was somewhere else, not here, in this apartment. I might have been in Prague, or Paris, a romantic overseas destination.

“As we ate, I think I came a little. She had prepared my favourites, ad her favourites. And seafood is truly the way into a girl’s heart. With each course, she had perfectly matched the wine, and I think we probably have half a dozen half open bottles in the fridge now.

“For desert, she served chocolate fudge brownie with home made vanilla bean ice cream and chocolate sauce. On a single plate, with a single spoon. Easily the most romantic thing I have ever experienced. When I first saw her bring it out, I have to admit my heart fluttered a little bit. I was her perfect engagement dessert, and I was a bit worried that she was going to beat me to the engagement.

“But, there was no ring, so I relaxed, enjoying the orgasmic goodness that is her brownies. Enjoying the sensuality of feeding each other, of the kisses we shared while we were eating.

“By the time we had finished eating, I had almost forgotten about my plans to propose. The ring was tucked into my bra. You know you boys have it so much easier. I mean, almost all of your clothing, including your formal wear, has pockets. The more formal ours gets, the less pockets it has.”

As I apologized, on behalf of my entire gender, Alice continued. “We danced, and talked, and drank champagne with wild hibiscus flowers in it. Perfect.

“At five minutes to midnight, Bella stepped back from me. She pulled the chain from around her neck, and smoothly took the pendent off it. So smoothly, that I couldn’t see what it was. Looking deeply into my eyes, she asked the most perfect question.

“She asked me if she could share her midnight kiss with her fiance, and if every midnight kiss from now on would be with her wife. She handed me the ring, placing it part way onto my first finger. Giving me the ability to move it onto my ring finger. So that she was not claiming ownership of me, but instead a bond of love.
“Tears were streaming down my face, tears of joy. I beamed at her, and reached inside my bra.”

Bella started to speak now. She had been so silent for Alice’s story, I had almost forgotten she was there. “Alice took my hands, and placed a ring on my first finger.

“And then, she said that she would share a kiss with her fiancé at midnight, only if I would agree to marry her as she had agreed to marry me.

“We shared our midnight kiss, and it was perfect.

“And Jasper, I don’t think you really need to hear the end of the story. But thank you for your help, for vacating the apartment last night.

June 15, 2016

Bella and Alice had decided on a year long engagement, getting married on New Years Eve. It was the day they had started dating, and the day that they had gotten engaged, so it seemed the perfect time to get engaged.

They decided to do things differently to the traditional wedding, and asked Esme if they could have the ceremony in her house. Of course, Esme immediately agreed.

Alice has asked me if I will ‘walk her down the aisle,’ and Bella has asked Carlisle to do the same.

The ceremony is going to be small, intimate. The guest list is currently Esme, Carlisle, Emmett, Rosalie, Edward, and myself. I can’t see it growing in the next six months.

October 17, 2016

Alice and Bella think they have found the perfect person to perform the ceremony for them. She doesn’t mind working on New Years Eve, and will happily perform the same sex civil union ceremony that Alice and Bella want. Despite the laws being passed for nearly two decades, within the state, and over a year federally, it is surprising how many ministers or celebrants still won’t perform the ceremony.
I think when Bella and Alice first met Zafrina, they knew she was the right one for them. The tall, amazonian woman towered over both of them, making them look tinier and more child like by comparison. Her dark skin glowed, and her brown eyes seemed to have a burgundy tint to them. She wore her hair long, in braids that cascaded down her back, and jingled quietly as she walked, thanks to the thousands of tiny bells woven into them. She looked so foreign, so magical, that she perfectly suited Bella and Alice’s wedding.

January 1, 2017

Yesterday, New Year’s Eve, was Bella and Alice’s wedding. The ceremony was perfect magical, perfectly suited to them.

Alice and Bella had decided that they wanted to keep in tradition with previous years, and have their first kiss as a married couple at midnight. This meant that they would have the reception first, and the ceremony second. So perfectly them.

Alice had been delighted to be given the opportunity to design the wedding dresses. Knowing that there would be a meal before the ceremony, and knowing that white was notoriously difficult to keep clean, she decided that they would both get two dresses, one dark coloured for the dinner, and the traditional white for the ceremony.

The dresses were perfect for both of them. Alice had given Bella a deep blue dress, which hugged her curves, and had a long slit up the left leg so she could move. The back had lacing in it and the neckline plunged. Alice had tried to make it strapless, but Bella had flatly refused, claiming she needed her dress held up, didn’t want to spend the night worrying that it would fall off if she moved wrong. Alice capitulated, giving Bella spaghetti straps that linked to the lacing down her back. Alice’s dress was blood red, and cut in a similar style to Bella’s. However, she had gone strapless, and the dress zipped up the back, not laced. Both dresses had delicate beading details on the bodices, Alice’s in the deep blue of Bella’s dress, and Bella’s in the blood red of Alice’s dress.

They both looked perfect, amazing, beautiful.

And, they were glowing with happiness.

It turns out that Alice’s predictions were correct. The meal started with a lobster bisque, and the deep red colour of the tomatoes in it would have been disastrous if dropped on a white dress.
Esme had insisted on decorating her house, and Alice had made the dresses, so Bella insisted on catering. For nine people, she reasoned, it would be easy enough to do. Although Alice tried to argue, claiming that it would take up too much of Bella’s time, that she would spend the entire evening in the kitchen, Bella held her ground. She said that everything could be prepared in advance, and anyone could heat, plate and serve.

Bella had decided on a five course meal, one for every year she and Alice had been together. She had carefully crafted the meal, and the flavors melded perfectly.

We started with a lobster bisque, before mini zucchini and goats cheese tartlets with a side of proscuitto wrapped asparagus, and mushroom and sun dried tomato bruschetta, before salmon, vermicelli and vegetable parcels with a soy and ginger sauce. To round out the meal, Bella had decided on bang bang chicken salad.

And lastly, the dish that started it all, that was the reason that Bella had arrived in Seattle and in my class. Chocolate brownies with vanilla bean ice cream and chocolate sauce.

Emmett had been instructed on the presentation of the dishes, on the final steps of presentation, and so Bella was able to sit and enjoy the meal, with someone else doing all the work.

At eleven, Alice and Bella disappeared upstairs. Half an hour later, Carlisle and I followed them upstairs, to collect them for their walks down the isle. Everyone else had moved outside. Alice had decided to use her proposal plan from the previous year as the basis for her wedding celebrations, and the ceremony was going to be conducted under Esme’s winter flowering jasmine. Carlisle and Emmett had carefully positioned heaters around the space, heating it against the winter chill.

Alice had designed the wedding dresses, and they were totally different from the dresses both girls wore at dinner.

Alice’s dress was inspired by the 1950s, tea length she told me. It was snow white, apparently. The skirt was tiered lace, the bodice was fitted, with small capped sleeves and a boat neck. Bella’s dress was different, ivory coloured. Again, it was lace, with a high neck line or mandarin collar as Alice described it, and a button up bodice. The shirt was flared, wedding tulle that fell to just above Bella’s ankles.

Neither girl was going to wear a veil, and given the chance of snow or rain, they had both opted for flat shoes. Bella’s ballet style slippers laced up around her ankles, while Alice had white patent
Mary Janes.

My unknown reader, please don’t judge me for knowing all of this. You don’t live with two women for as long as I have and not learn this stuff. You don’t grow up with Alice and not absorb it all by osmosis.

Bella and Alice had gotten dressed in the same room, and the door was open when Carlisle and I got to the top of the stairs. Alice’s hair was still cut short, and she had it spiked in her usual style. Bella’s hair, long and flowing, was carefully curled, and Alice was just putting the final touches to it.

They looked beautiful, and radiant.

Alice picked up two cashmere wraps, handing Bella the deep blue and wrapping the blood red around her own shoulders.

Smiling, they indicated they were both ready, and it was time for the ceremony.

Carlisle offered his left arm to Bella, and I did the same for Alice. We walked down the stairs, Bella and Carlisle in front, pausing in the living room. The double doors leading to the backyard were open, and we stood side by side at them. Taking a deep breath, Carlisle and I led the girls out to the trellis, and their waiting family.

As we walked forward, a light dusting of snow began to fall. Alice smiled, and turned her face to the sky in joy.

Edward, entrusted with photographing the wedding, snapped the moment. I know he took hundreds of photos of the ceremony, of the dinner before hand and the dancing afterwards, but that was the only photo I was aware of being taken.

Neither girl wanted a religious ceremony, instead choosing readings that focused on the love they felt towards each other. They had discussed the ceremony with Zafrina, and she had told them that the only things that they had to do was agree to marry each other, and sign the wedding certificates with witnesses.

So, Alice had orchestrated a wedding ceremony perfectly suited to herself and Bella.
As we arrived in front of Zafrina, she began to speak.

“Who, though the love they feel, gives these women to each other, so their love may continue to blossom?”

Carlisle and I answered, aiming for unison. “We, in love, do.”

Carlisle and I stepped away from Alice and Bella, Carlisle to stand by Esme’s side, and I to stand by Rosalie.

When we were in place, Zafrina spoke again. “So, I will ask Esme to step forward.”

As requested, Esme did a short reading, on behalf of both girl’s mothers. The ones lost through tragedy, and prejudice.

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove
O, no! It is an ever-fix’d mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom
If this be error and upon me prov’d,
I never writ, not no man ever loved.
As Esme stepped back, returning to Carlisle’s side, Zafrina began to speak again.

“Your love shine brightly, and, as Shakespeare warned us, it must alter because of doom, or the passage of time, or impediment.

“Alice, Bella, you are surrounded by a family you have created for yourselves, a family that I have observed you interact with, have observed the love you all share.

“Bella and Alice have decided on non traditional vows.

“If you could take each other’s hands please, and repeat after me,

“I love you not only for what you are,
But for what I am when I am with you
I love you not only for what you have made of yourself
But for what you are making me
I love you for the part of me that you bring our
I love you for passing over all my foolish and weak traits,
That you can’t help but see
I love you for drawing out into the light my beauty
That no one else has looked quite far enough to din
I love you.

“Alice, Bella please exchange your rings.”

Rosalie walked up to them, and handed them the two rings. Looking into each other’s eyes, they each placed the wedding band on the first finger of the left hand. In turn, they reached down, and moved the rings from their first to ring fingers. Bella had been very adamant about this. She said that she was choosing to marry Alice, so she should be the one to place the ring on her finger. She saw the placement of the ring on the ring finger by the partner as a form of control, of marking ownership. She had done that, and was not going to do it again.
As the rings were in place, Zafrina began to speak again. “Friends, there is one final step for these two wonderful women to be married. Who is acting as a witness on their register?”

Emmett and I stepped forward, and signed the register. Edward happily snapped photos, as Alice, Bella, Emmett and I signed the documents.

As we returned to our places, Zafrina made her closing remarks. “With the exchange of the rings, your vow of love, and the signing of the register, I am delighted to announce you are married. Enjoy long and happy lives together.”

Zafrina glanced at her watch. “Bella, Alice, I invite you to share your first kiss as a married couple, at midnight, in three, two, one.”

Alice stood on her toes, and Bella leaned down slightly. Their kiss was passionate, and I almost felt like I was intruding on a private moment between the two of them.

As they pulled apart, I saw Bella’s tell tale blush as Zafrina once again addressed us. “I welcome you all to congratulate Mary-Alice Brandon Whitlock Swan and Isabella Marie Brandon Whitlock Swan.”

I will admit, my unknown reader, I teared up a bit when I saw the joy on my sister and Bella’s faces. I knew that despite the things life would and could throw at them, they were perfect for each other, and would have long lives together.

We all returned inside, and Esme insisted we take another round of photographs. Zafrina offered to take these, allowing the family to be complete, for Edward to be in a few of the photographs of the evening.

After taking a few more photographs, Zafrina quietly left. I’m not even sure that Bella and Alice were aware of it.

Edward continued to snap photographs, as the two girls danced. I truly hope he got a photo of me dancing with Alice, and Bella dancing with Carlisle.
My unknown reader, it was almost four am when we retired, leaving Bella and Alice slow dancing on the Cullen’s living room floor.

They looked so happy, and so in love.

Chapter End Notes

the quote is Shakespeare Sonnet 116, while the vows are I love you - anon.
My unknown reader, I don’t totally know what came over me today.

But, today I felt the need to mark my skin. The overwhelming urge that it simply had to be today, that I couldn’t wait a single moment longer.

A year or so ago, I met Carmen. She and I hit it off almost immediately, her easy demeanor and Latin fire making her an easy, if not passionate, friend. She and her husband Eleazar owned a tattoo parlor near our apartment. In the mornings either Carmen or Eleazar - usually Carmen - would often stop into the coffee shop where I picked up my breakfast of coffee and a pastry.

A breakfast habit I got into because of my week with Lilly.

It's been ten years, and I still haven’t managed to get her out of my mind. I compare every girl I date to her, and none of them measure up. They are too talkative, or too fake, or I dunno, too anything that means they aren’t her.

But, Carmen seemed to follow the same routine as I did. Slowly, over the course of several months, we started up a relationship. It started with the nod of recognition. We then moved onto the quiet exchange of ‘mornings,’ before progressing onto discussions of the weather. This lasted months, until finally one day, about a year ago, Carmen turned to me, and introduced herself.

“Hi, I’m Carmen. I’m a tattoo artist, happily married, so if your’e looking for anything more than a friendly flirt in the morning, you need to look elsewhere, and I love to flamenco and salsa.” She stuck out her hand, and I shook it, noticing that she had offered her left hand, the one that had a delicate tattoo around the ring finger. The one that marked her as married. Her accent was weak, but clearly marked her words. She lisped slightly, and it made me wonder what part of Spain she was. The lisp marked her as Spanish, not South America.

When I had first seen her, it had been an unseasonably warm summer, and she had been wearing a spaghetti strap top, exposing the colorful designs on her back. Her arms were unmarked, and I had often wondered why. I later found out that it was because she had, until she started coming into the coffee shop, she had been a grade school teacher, working as a tattoo artist on the side. She could cover her wedding tattoo with a conventional wedding ring, but didn’t like wearing long sleeved
shirts all year. And, what with the professional inappropriateness of tattoo sleeves, she had never had them done.

I’m sure that I blinked, unable to respond for a few seconds when she first introduced herself.

“Jasper. Second year Architecture masters student, single, knew you were married, but will happily flirt if you want, and have never salsaed in my life.”

She had smiled, apparently liking my answer. “Well, now that’s all settled, I guess we can be friends. You work around here?”

“No, I live a few blocks away with my sister. And, as I said, I am studying at UW.”

She nodded as if that explained everything. As we reached the counter, she ordered for me, surprising me a little.

“Oh, come on, Jasper. It’s been months, and I have heard your coffee order every day. The coffee is always the same, and you always pair it with a pastry. They change… but I thought you would like a danish today. The cherries look so appetizing, no?”

Seeing the truth in her words, I realised that I probably could have ordered her coffee as well. It really had taken us months to introduce ourselves.

And with that, we slowly started to get to know each other. I visited the tattoo parlor a couple of times, and slowly began to become friends with Eleazar too. Like Carmen, his Spanish accent, stronger than hers, especially when they treated me to a paella and sangria, made him lisp slightly.

As our relationship developed, I learnt that they were both from Madrid, and had moved here almost a decade ago. They were both older than my twenty-four years, both in their mid thirties. As the weather got steadily colder and wetter, they both expressed their disgust at the Seattle winter, at the lack of sunshine. When I asked them why they didn’t go back to Madrid, back to the warmth of Spanish winters, they looked at me like I had two heads.

“But why would we do that? We have a successful business, we have good friends, and we are away from our prying families,” Carmen had reasoned. I later learned that while both of them loved their families dearly, they were a little too involved in their lives, a little too interested in
when the grandchild would be born, in why they had been together so long and weren’t married.

This confused me. I had seen the rings, both physical and tattoo, and assumed they were married. Carmen had introduced herself to me as married.

“Oh,” Eleazar spoke up, “we are married. We had a civil union in 2003, before we left Spain. But, we both come from big Catholic families. None of them would accept that we were married, because we didn’t have the church wedding, the mass. We didn’t exchange rings at the ceremony, instead giving each other these - ” he lifted his ring finger, waving it to draw my attention “ - afterwards. And, these really don’t count as wedding rings in either of our families eyes. If we visited any of them, we couldn’t sleep in the same bed, or the same room, because we weren’t married. And they would constantly pester us for the church mass. So, we left. The weather is about the only thing we miss.”

Slowly, they began to hear some of my back story. I had tentatively told them about the tattoo I wanted, day lilies and calla lilies on my back and shoulder, and Eleazar had set about creating a design. He created five of them, each of them getting closer and closer to what I wanted.

The sixth one was perfect. It fitted me exactly, and the lilies were placed exactly where I wanted them. Both Carmen and Eleazar, as well as Alice, had counseled me on the potential ramifications of having such a, well, feminine design on my body, as the only design on my body.

But, I knew that I wanted it. I knew that this was a way for me to keep her in my heart, as part of my life, even though I knew that I would probably never see her again.

So, today was the day. Well, the day for outlines at least. The flowers themselves were going to be shaded pink to orange, orange to white, yellow to orange. Orange, though, was going to be the most prevalent colour. It was the colour of her hair in the sun, when the natural highlights showed up in her beautiful chocolate locks.

Eleazar and Carmen had cursed my specificity for the design, but the understood why I needed it to be perfect. Not least because it was going to be marking my body for the rest of my life. But, because of what it represented to me.

Eleazar did the outlines. Carmen would ink the color later, after the outlines had healed. I had spent six years pondering this design, I knew I could wait a month or two for the design to heal correctly.
The stems of the lilies started just under my left shoulder blade. They travelled up my back, over the scars that she had seen, and hadn’t pitied me for, to my shoulder. I was having five flowers in total, one calla lily on my back, behind my shoulder joint, a pair of calla lilies on my shoulder, on the join of the neck and shoulder muscle, where she had bitten down on me that first night, and two day lilies just under my collar bone.

I would be lying if I said that it didn’t hurt. It was painful, but not to the point that I needed to stop. Both Carmen and Eleazar were carefully watching me as the ink was applied, carefully monitoring my pain levels, ensuring that I didn’t push myself too far. They did this out of friendship for me, and concern for my well being. They knew that the tattoo could bring out painful memories for me.

I was lucky, and I didn’t get any memories, the process of applying the ink to my skin was nothing more than physical pain. When Eleazar finally finished, and showed me the outline in the mirror, I had to smile. It wasn’t even colored yet, and it was perfect.

February 5, 2018

My tattoo was finished today.

It is amazing, and perfect, but doesn’t even compare to the girl it represents.

Carmen was amazing, slowly shading the flowers, the stems and leaves. The colors are so vibrant against my skin, popping out like something in a 3D movie.

Alice and Bella think it is perfect, that it suits me, that it isn’t overly feminine. Then again, they know the full story of why I got it in the first place.

All the flowers are low enough that I can cover them with a collared shirt, even with the top button or two undone. It was one of my stipulations, the need to be presentable and not have my tattoo showing to the world when I have to talk to potential clients, employers, people in the real world.

October 14, 2018
I met a girl at a bar yesterday.

Daphne.

She was totally different to Lilly, and that was part of her attraction.

She was sweet, and funny, and we talked. I was stunned when she had first sat down by me, but she soon charmed her way into me letting her stay. We talked, and we flirted. For over four hours.

When we were kicked out for closing, I tentatively asked if she would like to come back to my apartment. We both knew what that meant.

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that she said yes, but at the same time I was. I almost expected her to give me her number and vanish into the night, all smiles and full of potential.

In the elevator, I finally gave in to temptation and kissed her. She tasted like the green drinks she had been drinking all night, sweet and fruity. We stumbled into the apartment, and I was grateful that Alice had left the hall light on.

Tugging her to my bedroom, I switched off the hall light, and switched on the three reading lamps I had in my bedroom. Something about the late hour, and having met her only that night made the overhead light seem too harsh, to intense.

Hunggrily, she started pulling at my clothing, her lips still locked on mine. She had my shirt off, and I was fumbling with her top. With it’s lack of buttons, I couldn’t remove it and keep kissing her.

Stepping back, I drew her top over her head, discarding it onto my bedroom floor.

In stepping back, I had created enough distance between us for her to take in my torso, for her to see the tattoo.

She let out a gasp, and moved her hands towards the flower on my neck. Her hands hovered just above my skin, close enough that I could almost, but not really, feel them.
And then, she jerked her hand away, as if I had burned her or something, and turned on her heel. Grabbing her her discarded shirt, her purse from by the door, she fled into the night. I followed her downstairs, calling out to her, but she ignored me.

I watched as she miraculously hailed a taxi, and got in, leaving my world.

I slowly made my way back upstairs, shaking my head to try to figure out what the hell had just happened.

I mean, what the fuck was that about? Clearly it was linked to the tattoo in some way, but I can’t even begin to fathom why it made her run like that.

_April 18, 2019_

I ran into the girl again. Daphne. She remembered me, and clearly remembered her actions six months ago.

I was once again at the bar, and she once again approached me. Holding a beer towards me like a peace offering, I gestured for her to sit down.

As she did, she started talking. Apologizing for her actions. Slowly, she explained that seven months ago, barely a month before we met, she had gotten out of a long, highly abusive relationship with a guy. They guy was covered in tattoos, the ink marking his body. The tattoo, so unexpected, was something of a trigger to her. When they had first started dating, his skin was unmarked, and he wasn’t abusive. But, as he slowly began to cover his skin with more and more ink, he became more and more abusive. She linked them in her mind, and seeing my tattoo had freaked her out. It was so well covered that she had been shocked by it, not expecting it.

I nodded, understanding, at least theoretically. I knew that emotional abuse, the type that she had experienced, was damaging, not something to scoff at. But, having never experienced it myself, my understanding would never be anything other than theoretical. I really couldn’t understand the fear the girl had felt when she saw my tattoo.

She apologized again, and left. I knew I’d never see her again, but that was okay. She had seemed so different the second time we had met, happier and healthier. I was glad that she was free, glad that she was in a place where she could tell me, an almost stranger, the truth of her experiences.
I became an uncle tonight. Like, actually, really, truly biologically, and uncle.

Bella gave birth to twins tonight. Tanya Elizabeth Brandon Whitlock Swan and Kate Edwina Brandon Whitlock Swan.

I love the advances in the medical field. Because my darling sister and her wife didn’t need a guy to have children. And not the stupid argument that some awful homophobic people come out with, in that a woman needs a man blah blah you’re-an-idiot blah. And not the old fashioned, you need sperm to fertilize and egg need for a guy.

No, thanks to the advances in medical technology, their twins are biologically both of theirs. The wonderful fertility assistants used one of Alice’s eggs to fertilize one of Bella’s eggs. Crazy and awesome and amazing.

Bella and Alice got lucky. They ended up with identical twins from their single implanted egg. The girls are so pretty. They already have a gorgeous head of hair. They are beautiful.

I’m an uncle again! Alice’s daughter was born tonight. Irina Sasha Swan Brandon Whitlock. She was huge, and my tiny little sister looked like she was going to burst. Like Tanya and Kate, the girls are the product of one of Alice’s and one of Bella’s eggs.
Of course, they were all going to be girls. It’s simple genetics. Each egg has a single x chromosome. Put them together, and you get the pair of x chromosomes, making a beautiful little girl.

I do feel a little out numbered now though. I’ve spent the last year living with two hormonal, pregnant women. And now I have a house with two new mothers and three baby girls. Five against one. And they all have me wrapped around their little fingers. I know I shouldn’t, but those little girls are going to be so spoilt.

8 October 2019

I was right. The girls aren’t even a year old, and already they are so spoilt. Not that I really expected anything else from the Cullen - Whitlock clan (cos lets face it. It’s a clan. We fill entire sections of restaurants when we go out. We need busses to transport us all in the one vehicle. We’re loud, and energetic, and boisterous.)

1 January 2020

Last night we celebrated another milestone. Alice and Bella clearly like the 31st of December, because they decided that as well as being all of their anniversaries, it should be the girls’ naming day. Thanks to Bella’s religious upbringing, a religious ceremony was out of the question. Not that Alice or I have ever been religious. We were both baptized, but that was as far as our parents got for religion with us. They raised us with strong morals and ethics, but not religion.

I wish I could talk to them, to ask them why, but I’m glad. I know what is right, and what is wrong without someone telling me. Without the sense of shame that can be put on people because of religious frameworks. I dunno. I’m not looking to rant here. But, I just don’t get it. I can see some of the amazing things that organised religion has done. It creates a sense of community in an often isolated world. I know people who are highly religious, but don’t push their beliefs on others. Who don’t make their whole personalities about religion. But I have also seen the mental scars that organised religion has left on people. There is light and dark to every situation.

But, I’m getting off topic.

Alice and Bella decided on a naming day for the girls. Each of them had been given their full names - quite a mouthful for each of them, once you get into it. Because Alice and I already carry our mother’s maiden name as a middle name. Then Alice and Bella each took the other’s surname
when the got married. So they each carry three ‘surnames’ although they each only use the one in
their everyday lives. Each girl has also been given a middle name of one of their forebears.
Elizabeth for Alice and my mother, Edwina for our father, and Sasha for Bella’s grandmother.
Bella loved her grandmother, Sasha-Marie passed away when she was one-hundred and one, and
Bella was ten. Although she rarely talks about her family, Bella mentioned her grandmother on
several occasions. Once, when she was very drunk, she told Alice and I that Sasha-Marie had told
her, maybe a month before she passed away, to always follow her heart, even if it seemed
impossible, or led in directions that other people deemed unacceptable. That she should and would
find great love and not settle for anything less. In her drunken state, Bella admitted that she might
be reading too much into it, but she has always believed that Sasha-Marie was acknowledging her
sexual orientation, and accepting it. It seems only fitting that Bella remember her grandmother as
we remember our parents.

Whereas Bella and Alice’s wedding was a late evening ceremony, Alice decided on a mid-morning
celebration for the naming day. Zafrina officiated, and it was wonderful to see the Amazon again.
She looked thrilled each time she saw one of the girls, delighting in pulling silly faces and blowing
bubbles to entertain them.

The decision was made (I think that I might have been consulted, but I have taken to just agreeing
to what Alice and Bella want, it’s easier) that our apartment would host the naming day. I can’t
think of a better setting, with the windows overlooking the water. Edward was asked to take photos
again, after the beautiful and brilliant photos he took for the wedding. He’s growing up so well.
He’s a creative soul, like his mother. Carlisle loves him dearly, and although I think he’d like
Edward to follow him into medicine, he indulges his creative passions - music and photography.
Esme insisted on catering, and Rosalie baked a wonderful cake for each of the girls.

Alice and Bella agonized over some choices for the day, while others were easy. They told me that
it was simple to make Rose, Emm and myself the guide parents (like godparents, but without the
religious element), but choosing the colour of the dresses for the girls was agonizing. Neither Bella
or Alice wanted to go with white dresses for the girls. Nor did they want to go with baby pink, or
any other pastel colour. I swear, I listened to discussions about colours for over 3 months.

In the end, the girls were all dressed in flame colours. To quote Alice, “because their light shines
brighter than any flame.” Each dress was different, but they all worked together. Each dress had
shades of yellows, oranges and reds. They looked stunning. Bella and Alice wore earth colours,
deep blue for Bella and forrest green for Alice. I’m sure Alice came up with a symbolic reason for
the colour choice, but she never told me what it was. And, I know how much she loves Bella in a
deep blue. I have to agree, it’s a colour that makes her look amazing - it makes her skin look almost
translucent, shining from within. The five of them together, my sisters and nieces, were simply
stunning. I’m sure the photographs will be amazing, and I couldn’t help but shed a few tears during
the ceremony.

I’m sure a lot of the naming day ceremony was highly cliche. And yet, it was beautiful. We were
surrounded by friends and family. The sun was out for a rare day in Seattle, and was streaming
through our windows. The girls were amazingly well behaved, balanced on the hips of their mothers. A few moments stood out to me. But perhaps the one that meant the most to me was the moment that Esme got up and read a Doctor Seuss poem. She read the whole thing, and suddenly I remembered my mother reading the book to Alice and I as we went to bed as children.

Congratulations!
Today is your day,
You’re off to Great Places!
You’re off and away! You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.
You’re on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.

You’ll look up and down streets. Look ‘em over with care.
About some you will say, “I don’t choose to go there.”
With your head full of brains, and your shoes full of feet,
you’re too smart to go down any not-so-good street.

And you may not find any
you’ll want to go down.
In that case, of course,
you’ll head straight out of town.

It’s opener there
in the wide open air.

Out there things can happen
and frequently do
to people as brainy
and footsy as you.

And when things start to happen,
don’t worry. Don’t stew.
Just go right along.
You’ll start happening too.

OH!
THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!

You’ll be on your way up!
You’ll be seeing great sites!
You’ll join the high fliers!
who soar to high heights.

You won’t lag behind, because you’ll have the speed.
You’ll pass the whole gang and you’ll soon take the lead.
Wherever you fly, you’ll be best of the best.
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.

Except when you don’t.
Because, sometimes, you won’t.

I’m sorry to say so
but, sadly, it’s true
that Bang-ups
and Hang-ups
can happen to you

You can get all hung up
in a prickle-ly perch.
And your gang will fly on.
You’ll be left in a Lurch.

You’ll come down from the Lunch
with an unpleasant bump.
And the chances are, then,
that you’ll be in a Slump.

And when you’re in a Slump,
you’re not in for much fun.
Un-slumping yourself
is not easily done.

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.
Some windows are lighted. But mostly they’re dark.
A place that could sprain both elbow and chin!
Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?
How much can you lose? How much can you win?

And IF you should go in, should you turn left or right...
or right-and-three-quarters? Or maybe not quite?
Or go around and back and sneak from behind?
Simple it’s not, I’m afraid you will find,
for a mind-maker-upper to make up his mind.

You can get so confused
that you’ll start in to race
down long and wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,
headed, I fear, toward a most useless place

The Waiting Place...

...for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go
or a bus to come, or a plane to go
or the mail to come, or the rain to go
or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow
or waiting around for a Yes or a No
or waiting for their hair to grow.
Everyone is just waiting.

Waiting for the fish to bite
or waiting for wind to fly a kite
or waiting around for Friday night
or waiting, perhaps, for their uncle Jake
or a pot to boil, or a Better Break
or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants
or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.
Everyone is just waiting.

NO!
That’s not for you!

Somehow you’ll escape
all that waiting and staying.
You’ll find the bright places
where boom bands are playing.

Oh, the places you’ll go! There is fun to be done!
There are points to be scored. There are games to be won.
And the magical things you can do with that ball
will make you the winning-est winner of all.
Fame! You’ll be famous as famous can be,
with the whole wide world watching you win on TV.

Except when they don’t.
Because, sometimes, they won’t.

I’m afraid that some times
you’ll play lonely games too.
Games you can’t win
’cause you’ll play against you.

All Alone!
Whether you like it or not.
Alone will be something
you’ll be quite a lot.

And when you’re alone, there’s a very good chance
you’ll meet things that scare you right out of your pants.
There are some, down the road between hither and yon,
that can scare you so much you won’t want to go on.

But on you will go
though the weather be foul.
On you will go
though your enemies prowl.
On you will go
though the Hakken-Kraks howl.
Onward up many
a frightening creek,
though you arms may get sore
and your sneakers may leak.

On and on you will hike.
And I know you’ll hike far
and face up to your problems
whatever they are.

You’ll get mixed up of course,
as you already know.
You’ll get mixed up
with many stray birds as you go.
So be sure when you step.
Step with care and great tact
and remember that Life’s
a Great Balancing Act.
Just never forget to be dexterous and deft.
And never mix up your right foot with you left.

And will you succeed?
Yes! You will indeed!
(98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed!)

KID YOU’LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!

So…
be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
or Mordecai Ali Van Alenn O’Shea
you’re off to Great Places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So… get on your way!

We own this piece of land in the middle of nowhere. It has no buildings on it, nothing around for miles. Every summer holidays, Mom and Dad would take a month off work, and we would go to the land. We would take tents and we’d camp, and just be. There were no phones, no electricity, heck, not even any running water, but it was perfect.

Alice and I haven't been back since our parents accident.

We pay one of the people with a nearby property to look after it for us. They run animals on it, I think. We don’t mind, so long as they don’t over graze or over farm it. As a child, the land was covered in sunflowers. I remember there being sunflowers for miles, and playing hide and seek in them. There is a cleared patch, roughly in the middle of the land, and we would camp there, surrounded by the fields of sunflowers, their gold and black heads swaying in the wind. I’ve heard the sound of the prairies when the wind blows compared to the ocean, but to me the sound of the wind in the sunflowers was like the ocean. It had crashes and lulls like waves breaking on shore. I don’t know I can even go back there, and have anything on the land but sunflowers.

I remember those things, but what I didn’t remember was Mom reading to us. Our mother was a romantic soul, a dreamer even. She always told Alice and I that the sky was the limit, that we could
accomplish anything we set our minds to. And in those summer vacations, we would lie in our tents staring at the stars in the sky, brighter than anything I have ever seen. And she would read to us. That same story every night.

*Oh! The places you’ll go!*, by Dr Seuss.

I think Alice remembered though. I looked at her as Esme started reading and the memories started flooding back. It was as if she could feel what I was feeling, hear what I was thinking, and I could do the same for her. At the end of Esme’s reading, tears were streaming down my face.

Alice gave me more, today, than the gift of being a guide parent. She gave me back something I didn’t even know I’d been missing.
Alice came home bouncing with excitement today. Esme has been slowly giving her more and more responsibilities in the company, and we both know that when Esme finally retires, In Love Designs will be Alice’s. Today though, Esme had handed an entire movie over to her, and potentially a seven movie series. It was going to be shot on locations around the country, and it was Alice’s responsibility to organize a team to do the costumes, to create the look, to travel to location, to source and create the pieces, everything.

It was the most responsibility she had ever been given, the first time something was completely and totally hers.

And, it is the first thing she is in charge of since taking maternity leave with Irina.

She was ecstatic, and it took both Bella and I to calm her down, to get her to stand still long enough to explain why she was so excited.

We decided to take Alice out, in celebration, to one of our favorite restaurants. Esme kindly watched the girls, so that we could have a relaxing night. The meal was lovely, and I was glad to see my sister so happy.

Alice met Angela today. Apparently, Angela is the script writer, and her husband, Ben is the director. They are both going to produce the movie. Alice still hasn’t told me what the movie is, but did tell me that Angela and Ben bought the rights to the books. They are self funding, so all of the actors will be unknowns, and it will be done with as many indie methods as possible.
They were working with a very low budget, and were basically self funding the movie. Most of the budget was through crowd sourcing, from fans of the books. So, they had to do justice to the books, but the films had to feel independent and cult, so that they fans would be satisfied. The fans weren’t the screaming fan girls, but older, men too. Angela and Ben weren’t aligned with any movie studio, although once the film was shot, they would have to align themselves with a distributor.

As such, they weren’t using any CGI for the movie, concentrating on finding locations that matched what they needed rather than creating them digitally. Although green screening was the rage for films, Alice told me that Angela and Ben wanted to do this old school, in real places, real locations.

April 14, 2020

Alice finally told me what the film was called.

I almost fell over in surprise.

Alice, as her first big solo project, was creating the costumes for the Gunslinger movie.

May 20, 2020

Alice leaves for the desert location in two days. Bella is traveling with her and the girls for this part of the shoot, but will stay in Seattle when the shooting moves to Vancouver. They both know that the separation for the month long shoot in Vancouver is going to be difficult, but know that they are strong enough to get through it.

They’re going to be gone for five months - three in the desert, and two on the coast.

I’m going to miss them. I haven’t had the apartment to myself for longer than a week, ever. I don’t know what I’m going to do.

October 23, 2020
Alice and Bella and the girls got home yesterday. It was wonderful to see them, wonderful to have our house full once more. I know that it is weird that I still live with my sister and her wife, and their kids but they are family. My family. Family is important, special. I would much rather live with them than in a cold sterile apartment.

Alice insisted that we have the cast, and Angela and Ben around for dinner to celebrate. The shoot in both locations went well, and they have all the stuff they need, including the doubling scenes for the third film, if it ever gets made. The cast are mainly Seattle locals, returning home and meeting up before the month long shoot in Vancouver.

The actor playing Roland, whose name is, amusingly enough, Roland, was the only one on set for the full five months. Brown, the folk of Tull, Allie, Jake, the man in black, the oracle, had all been there for shorter periods of time. Jake, played by Timothy, and the man in black, played by Steven, were the only ones that would appear in later films, the only locals. The smaller characters, Alice said, were drawn from locals in the area near where they were shooting.

It was an eclectic mix at dinner. I was stunned when Roland walked in, he matched my mental image of Roland so well. Timothy came with his parents, and looked at Roland and Bella with adoring eyes, Steven was last, and even in the bright colors he wore today, I could see him as the man in black.

Despite the wide age ranges, the diverse interests and backgrounds, the dinner went well, and I could see the camaraderie that had built up over the time away. The cast was so small that everyone had known everyone else, eating together at the end of each day, the adults often talking late into the night. Timothy’s parents had been on set with them all, and seemed as comfortable as any of the other people at the table.

The meal was Bella’s idea and she did most of the work, although she did use me as a kitchen hand for the day.

As always, her cooking was amazing. Although I can cook for myself, and cook well, her cooking far surpasses mine. And, it is just so depressing cooking for one, that I was glad to have her and Alice and the girls back.

At dinner, I found myself seated between Angela and Bella. The two girls kept having conversations across me, so I would join in occasionally. At some point during the night, Bella became interested in the conversation that Alice, sitting on her other side, was having. Angela and I continued to talk.
She was articulate, witty, and had me in stitches with laughter all evening. Occasionally Ben would pipe up, but mostly he stayed even quieter than Angela had been when we first sat down.

By the time everyone left, Angela had given me her card, and taken mine, with the promise of ‘meeting up again in the future.’ I knew that nothing was ever going to happen between us, with her being so clearly smitten with Ben, but it was nice to know that I still had charm, that I could still be the good southern boy I had been as an undergrad.


I don’t know how she did it, but Alice managed to expand Esme’s family again. Over the course of the filming of the Gunslinger, Alice had grown close to both Ben and Angela. So, she had talked Esme into inviting them to Christmas dinner. Esme seemed happy to have her family expand again, and seemed to like Ben and Angela immediately.

Both Angela and Ben’s families lived overseas, with Angela’s father acting as a minister in the Philippines, and Ben’s parents working with AIDS and HIV positive children in middle Africa. Neither family was able to come back to the states for the Christmas break, and Angela and Ben couldn’t justify the cost of visiting either set of parents. They let slip that they had liquidated most of their assets to make the Gunslinger movie, and to own the film rights to the seven books.

Over the course of dinner, Angela and Ben waxed lyrical about how great Alice was, about how she used a smaller budget than they had allowed for the costumes, and just how good they were. And then, they started on Bella, talking about how they had saved so much for their catering budget, because Bella had taken offense to the company they had initially hired, and fired them within the first week. She then catered for them for the rest of the shoot, and her food was better than any catering company could ever offer.

Alice smiled with pleasure, while Bella flushed with embarrassment. She still doesn’t know how to take a compliment.
I got a part in a movie today…

So, my unknown reader, I’m in a state of shock. The film franchise that Alice is working on, well, Angela told me to audition for a part. (And it is going to be a franchise. Angela and Ben are already starting the second movie, before the first is even released, they have that much faith in it. There was so much love for the first project from crowd sourced funding that they are able to make the second movie with the excess budget from that.) Over the last few months, since we met when Alice wrapped filming last year, Angela and I have been emailing about the books. She was amazed when she found out that I’m a fan. I told her how I got into the books, and she thought the story was terribly romantic, if not slightly stupid.

Gotta be the understatement of the decade…millennium even.

Anyway, Angela and I talked a lot. And a few days before Christmas she said I should read for one of the parts in her movie. I was totally against the idea… well, actually, not totally. I was intrigued by the idea, but I’m not an actor. I’m just a guy who loves the books. She told me that it didn’t matter, I should just do it. Because she wanted me to.

So, I did. And man was it scary. But it was also amazing. I had to read lines with Roland. He’s cool, but there was a camera rolling, and he’s trained at this. I felt unsure and off balance, and somehow substandard and inferior.

I left feeling less sure than I have from any job interview I’ve ever done. I have no frame of reference for what they wanted, what any director wants. But, I figured I’d always wonder ‘what if,’ so I’d give it a go. Throw the dice.

Apparently, my gamble paid off.

Angela rang me and offered me the part.
Me. In a movie. I just… I don’t have words…

8 January 2021

So, this movie part. I’m in a decent amount of the film. I think that Roland is the only person in more of the movie than me. In more of the shots? Oh, I don’t know the proper terminology, but you know what I mean.

It’s an eight month commitment.

I have a fill time job with ALEC.

Which means that today I went to talk to Jane. She’s still mentoring me, but more than that, she has become my friend. Somewhere along the way, our relationship morphed into something else. I learnt more of her story. Things that weren’t put in the official biography. Things about her childhood that make her make more sense. Things like how her brother, her twin, was 10 when he died. They were living in rough in Chicago. Malnutrition, inadequate sanitation and unsafe housing played a big part in his death she said. His name was Alec. Which is why ALEC is so important to her. It’s her way to honor him, to remember him. Jane continues to astound me.

We talked for a long time today. About the project I’ve been offered, who I would be working for and with and why. About what I’ve achieved at ALEC. About what I wanted to do. About how long I would be away. About the future commitments this would lead to.

We agreed that for this film, I would go on a strange sort of sabbatical. Actually, sabbatical is the wrong word - there is no career development in my time away. Just something totally different. So, I guess I’m just taking extended leave.

I accepted Angela’s offer today.

I am Eddie Dean.

I am going to fight naked, go through serious drug withdrawals and learn to shoot. I’m going to save a man’s life. It’s going to be interesting.
We flew to the beach today. The crew, Angela, Ben, Alice, Bella, the girls. Bella isn’t going to be with us the whole time for this shoot. Just the 4 months we spend on the beach. She’s spending the rest of the shoot at home. With the girls, which is going to be hard for me, but even harder for Alice. The whole shoot is 7 months, and I think the 3 months apart is going to involve a whole lot of flying home for the weekend. But, with the number of locations we are filming in for the last three months, Bella being with us just didn’t make sense. Hauling he kids around didn’t make sense.

The location is amazing. It’s postcard worthy, and totally deserted. Mainly because there is no road access. It’s all by water. The beach is crystal clear, with gentle waves. The sand is stunningly white. We have a weeks worth of supplies, and hopefully everything else we need here. Some of the crew will be going into the local village every week to get more supplies, but other than that, we are here, camping and living rough on location, for the next 4 months.

Setting up the tents, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the time as a kid down on the isolated land we visited each summer. I told Alice about it, and she agreed that it was probably time we visited.

Susannah arrived today.

Actually, I shouldn’t call her Susannah. Her name is Leah Clearwater, and she’s playing the second person in Roland’s troupe, the split personality Odetta Holmes / Detta Walker / Susannah Dean / Mia, Daughter of None.

Angela and Ben made an interesting decision in casting Leah. The books are very explicit that Odetta is African America, an activist in the Civil Rights movement. Leah, however, is half African American, half Native American. Gorgeous. Eddie is meant to fall instantly for Odetta, and with Leah I can see how that would happen. And I can see how an audience will fall for her as well. It’s just… well, the books place so much emphasis on her race, because of where her character comes from, that I really think it’s bold casting someone who isn’t full blood African America.

Not that there aren’t enough racial tensions and struggles for the Native American community.
I should have known there was a reason behind it though.

Ben and Angela seem fairly big on keeping it in the family. Casting unknowns makes financial sense, as they don’t have the budget of some of the big studios to draw on. They themselves are so unknown, that many big stars would be hesitant to sign onto the project anyway. Over the course of shooting, I’ve learnt that most of the people in the first film were people they knew. Very few were from blind auditions. Many of the crew are friends of friends. So, I shouldn’t have been surprised when Bella launched herself at Leah, almost pulling her out of her wheelchair. Alice just looked on and laughed.

Leah, it turns out, is from La Push, the Olympic Peninsular town that we visited on holidays years ago. Bella made friends with a number of the guys there. Including Jacob, Leah’s husband. Bella being Bella, has kept in touch with the boys over the years, and suggested Leah to Ben and Angela. Who, of course, loved her and hired her, keeping the whole thing in the family.

Plus, it does help their budget that Leah is a double amputee. She was in the army, and lost the lower half of both her legs when an incendiary device went off and she was standing too close. It’s a nice bonus for Angela and Ben that they don’t have to use CGI for Susannah’s legs, but I’m sure that’s not why they hired her.

It’s strange seeing her again. She assures me that we met before, on that same holiday. Strange knowing that she remembers me, but I have no memory of her. It’s also lovely seeing her and Bella catching up. There are times I have worried about both Bella and Alice. They are so close, so absorbed in their relationship with each other that they don’t seem to have many friends outside of that relationship and our family. Not that I can really talk, but it’s lovely to see Bella with a girlfriend. They’ve been giggling and gossiping like teenagers. Leah has gushed over the girls, how pretty they are, how well behaved, all the things that parents want to hear.

15 June 2021

Leah adds a different dynamic to the set. She has clearly spent a lot of time around guys, because she doesn’t take any shit. She speaks her mind, and listens closely when it’s needed. I’m sure she has a temper on her, from the fire and passion she has already displayed.

Like me, this is Leah’s first leading role. Already, she is amazing. She’s got this… switch… that you can see when she is Detta and when she is Odetta. I’m sure she’ll have the same thing when Susannah comes into the storyline.
She’s perfect.

9 August 2021

Bella and the girls flew out today.

It makes sense, because the rest of the shoot is a week here, a fortnight there. Moving all the time.

Huh. Fortnight. It’s not a word I’ve even thought about in years. It’s not one I use everyday. It’s a word I picked up from Lilly. Huh.

But. Back to my point.

With the short filming locations that we have, it makes sense for Bella to spend the next few months at home with the girls. It’s going to be strange though. I’ve grown really accustomed to having her and Alice around, and the girls of course. Who I can’t stop spoiling. They are most definitely loved. But as hard as it’s going to be for me, I think it’s going to be even harder for Alice.

It’s been lovely seeing Bella interact with Leah for the last four months. Jacob, Leah’s husband came down a few times, and Bella clearly loves him. He treats her like a brother, and Leah treats her like a sister. The easy familial relationship they have seems to relax Bella. Which makes sense given the stressful childhood she had. In all the years we’ve known her, Bella’s parents haven’t contacted her once. And as much as we are all thrilled by that, it’s hard. Our parents would have loved her, and they are gone, and her parents are still here, but can’t accept her. Jacob and Leah treat her like family, chiding her and teasing her, and I love watching them interact. I know my sister makes her so happy, but it’s nice to see that other people can do the same thing. Leah’s going to miss Bella, I think. Their friendship really grew the last few months.

My unknown reader, I feel all over the place. I think I’m repeating myself, and I sincerely apologise for that.

13 August 2021.

Today is the first day of shooting the fight scene. The first day of shooting naked. And the first day I feel something akin to regret for the huge tattoo I have covering my body.
The makeup artists are amazing, but it takes *hours* to cover it up. And there is no logical way to work it into the story line, so it has to be covered. In every. Single. Scene. Where I am shirtless, for the rest of the movies.

Seriously, not fun.

30 August 2021

I miss Bella, but I think I miss her cooking the most.

Like last time, she took over the catering duties, and her food is just sooo much better than anything the craft service is feeding us. Not that their food is bad, but hers is better.

Alice is a hopeless cook, and always has been. She can burn water, I swear.

Leah has cooked a few times, but she flies back home in a week. Her parts are almost all filmed. Once she leaves, all the remaining scenes are between Roland and myself. Including the frightening fight scene.

I’m going to miss Leah when she leaves. As much as she is a sister to Bella, she is a friend to me. She asks nothing more from me than friendship, and expects the same in return.

3 October 2021

20 days til we go home!

20 days until I have to go back to the real world.

20 days til Alice sees Bella and the girls again.

20 days til I see Bell and the girls again
20 days until we have to leave this little bubble...
Seriously. I was only away for 8 months! Alice was even with me.

I get home, to be accosted by Bella.

Outside the apartment.

Which is immediately concerning. I know it’s a homecoming for her and Alice, but they have three small children. You can't leave them unattended for that long.

So, instead of any other greeting, IGNORING ALICE, Bella hands me a set of keys, pulls me towards one of the next door apartments, opens the door and shoves me inside.

My sister meanwhile is trailing behind us.

Bouncing.

I had thought her excitement was because she was so close to seeing Bella again.

Apparently I was wrong

Her excitement was because they have bought me the freaking apartment next door.

My bedroom has been moved here.

Apparently I have a decorator coming tomorrow.
Just.

Like.

I love them, but really?

12 November 2021.

The decorator came today. As promised.

Her name is Charlotte.

Alice arrived shortly after breakfast (my fridge is fully stocked. I have my own fridge. I’ve never had my own fridge), and explained that she and Bella bought the apartment for me (outright. No mortgage on this one. Bella has been getting some huge royalties from her books) because they are beginning to feel like I need my own space, surrounded by the five women. And because at some point, they will be moving the girls into their own rooms. Which means that Bella’s ground floor office will be transformed into a bedroom so that all three girls have a ground floor bedroom. They needed my bedroom. And they knew I didn’t want to live with just a thin wall between us again. That they knew how much I loved the apartment, and didn’t really want to kick me out. But then the apartment next door came up for sale, and the timing seemed perfect. Bella would be using one of the rooms as an office, but otherwise the space was all mine.

It’s hard to stay mad at her when she presents logical loving explanations.

Alice also explained that she didn’t want to impose her style on my new apartment, so she’d hired a decorator that she had dealt with in passing a few times. She thought that our aesthetics would gel well.

So, I met the decorator.

Charlotte.
And I have to admit, Alice was right.

I hate it when she is right, but really, who am I to bet against her? It always goes badly.

Alice flitted off when Charlotte arrived, after making the introductions.

Charlotte is another southerner, missing the sun. Her accent feels familiar and safe. She’s cute.

And I liked her ideas.

So, tomorrow, I am having yet another woman drag me around shopping.

At least I get more of a say than I ever got with Alice.

I think.

15 November 2021.

Wow.

Certainly got more input that Alice has ever given me.

Everything that Charlotte pointed out was perfect.

I am now the proud owner of an antique sleigh bed. A farmhouse dining table. Some of the most amazing bookshelves I have ever seen, with rustic wood edges. A few love seats. A peacock feather wingback chair. A statement entrance door that looks like a tree. A clawfoot bathtub. The comfiest couch I have ever sat in. A few camphor wood chests, a few antique wardrobes. A pair of daybeds. Solid dark wood sideboards.

Basically, an entire 4 bedroom home worth of furniture that doesn’t fit in Alice and Bella’s home.
That is perfect for mine.

None of it new (well, mattresses obviously). All of it worn and loved, and perfectly my aesthetic.

I spent three days shopping with Charlotte. We would start early, going to antique stores, flea markets, more antique stores. We shopped online, visited craigslist and ebay. Went to auction houses. Basically, anywhere that sold second hand furniture. I haven’t started promoting the movie, so I can still go outside anonymously. I don’t know how long that will last. We’d keep going until late in the evening.

And we ate lunch and dinner together, and chatted throughout the day as we drove to new stores. I think I saw more of Seattle in the last three days than the rest of the time I was living here. Charlotte seems to know everywhere to go.

She’s having carpenters come to do modifications to the apartment. Bookshelves. Reading nooks. A full, working office for me. Bella’s study (the only room Alice is allowed to decorate). A kitchen overhaul. Bathrooms redone.

I’m scared to ask what the budget she’s been given is.

30 November 2021

I’ve moved back into my old bedroom while the work is done to my apartment.

It’s nice being near my family again.

I asked for a door to be installed between the two apartments, so that we can come and go easily.

Charlotte pops by every few days to check the progress on my apartment. I’m starting to look forward to her visits. She spends about half an hour talking to the contractors, then another two hours talking to me. She always times her visits when I’m home, and not back at work with ALEC. Jane agreed that I should come back four days a week to start with. When press is required, we will reassess the timing. My employment.
I love my job at ALEC, but I also loved being on set.

I don’t know how Charlotte is so good at getting me at home, but I suspect that Alice and Bella have a hand in it.

I’m not complaining.

I asked her to come to Esme’s thanksgiving dinner yesterday. It was the first time I’ve invited someone for me, and it was nice not to be the only single adult there (Edward doesn’t count quite yet. He’s in that awkward transition between child and adult. He sits at our table, but he isn’t quite an adult yet. But he doesn’t want to be relegated to the children’s table any more. Especially now the triplets have started talking. They have definitely taken after Alice in their speech patterns.)

I was amazed when Charlotte said yes to thanksgiving, that she didn’t have plans of her own.

But, it was my own little selfish thanksgiving thing. Something to be privately thankful for.

As always, there was too much food. We all went home with leftovers. Even Charlotte.

4 January 2022

The work on my apartment was finished today. It’s amazing. Stepping between the two apartments, you can barely tell they have the same bones. The styles are so different. But perfect in their own ways.

Mine is… darker, I guess. More antique furniture. Heavier. So many bookshelves everywhere. But the huge windows make it feel light, even with the weight of the furniture.

Despite the children’s toys everywhere, Alice and Bella’s apartment is much more minimalist. Alice always did have a more minimalist aesthetic. My bedroom and Bella’s study were always the only rooms that didn’t have her influence stamped over them. My room was filled with things. And Bella’s office was always packed. Actually, not always. I could tell the day she finally felt comfortable living with us, when she redecorated the office to suit herself. Squishy armchair, desk pilled with books, floor to ceiling bookshelves everywhere else. The girls all get the same minimalist aesthetics in their rooms. Like at their naming days, there is not pink or pastel around. Three fire tones for the feature walls.
I asked Bella a while back if she wanted to have any more kids. They can afford it, and I see the love that the girls get. Their triplets. We all know they aren’t born on the same day, but it just became easier to talk about the triplets than explain the whole born a few months apart, but are all sisters, both Alice and Bella provided eggs, each had one pregnancy, blah, blah, blah.

I’m gonna miss living under the same roof, but I’m also looking forward to having my own apartment so close to theirs.

Charlotte came by to return her set of keys and do the big reveal. It’s not a surprise, I mean, I’ve been involved in the whole process, and living next door to the renovations. But Charlotte said it was the done thing. So we did the thing.

Charlotte asked me out today. And I said yes. I think it’s been coming for a while. Charlotte said that she couldn’t ask me out while I was still her client. Personal code of conduct and all that. But now we were no longer in a professional relationship, we could enter into a personal relationship.

I think this is going to be a good thing, my unknown reader.

1 April 2022

The shoot is shorter this time. Only 6 months. I’ve talked to Jane, and I’m going to become a consultant for ALEC. Which works for me. When I am in town, I will work there. Being a consultant frees me up to shoot and promote the films.

I’m worried about leaving Charlotte. It’s so early in our relationship, it seems like it could be the end for us.

24 June 2022

It’s hard, but it’s working. Charlotte and I talk almost every day on the phone while I’m on location. She’s flown down twice, and I’ve flown up once. I miss her so much when she’s not here, and sometimes even more when she is, because I know how short our time together is.
It’s so good to be home. Alice wasn’t on the set this year, because I Love Designs has gotten big enough to hire some assistants. In this instance, a costume assistant to be on set for the film, leaving Alice to work on other projects, and to spend time with the family. But I missed her, and the rest of the family.

I missed Charlotte too, but it was a different type of missing. It was that achey kind that you think is never going to leave, never going to be better. Then suddenly it isn’t there anymore. I mean, I expected it to stay. I still feel it about Lilly. But, it went away with Charlotte…

Don’t get me wrong. I am so happy to see her. But I just didn’t miss her as much as I thought I would.

Alice has designed some couple’s Halloween costumes for us. She won’t tell me who they are until the day. Charlotte knows, and keeps teasing me with the information.

1 November 2022

Sandy and Danny???

Really Alice???

Alice was there the first time I saw Grease. We had a revival theatre at home, which showed vintage movies. So the first time I saw Grease was on the big screen.

She experienced the uncontrollable laughter when they started singing Summer Nights. And those boo bop guys…

Yeah, I can’t take the film seriously.

I mean, Charlotte looked amazingly sexy in her Sandy costume - black pleather from the end of the film - but… really?
I dunno. Charlotte seemed happy.

New Years is a weird time for me.

Alice and Bella are always so happy. Their anniversary is always a cause for celebration, and I’ve always enjoyed the parties that Esme throws.

But, it’s hard to be happy when I’m not giddily happy myself.

I think Charlotte and I have run our course.

It was good, until it wasn’t.

But it’s so close to our anniversary, and to my sister’s, that I don’t want to taint anything.

But I can’t keep going through the motions.

I want to love her, I really do.

But, despite how much I try, I don’t love her.

I start press tours in a few weeks.

I know I have to be the man here.
I’ve ended it with Charlotte.

At 34, the just under a year we spent together is the longest relationship I’ve ever had.

But after a year, I should love her, right?
With the start of the press tours, Angela tells me I need an agent.

Not knowing any agents, I’ve had Alice and Esme recommend some.

I met with three of them, and the last seemed the right person for me.

I am the newest client of Victoria Anne Hilde.

My agent is Victoria Spencer. Apparently Anne and Hilde are the other two agents. They work from New York and LA respectively.

Victoria is striking. She’s tall, only an inch short of my height, and has a halo of curly read hair. You won’t loose her on red carpets, that’s for sure.

But, she had a no nonsense attitude that seemed sensible. She has advised me to keep my imdb and wiki profiles as empty as possible before the movie comes out. I’m sure there is a logic there, but I don’t know what it is. Something about the very very passionate fans on the film.

She has also been the second person outside of the family we have told Stephanie Meyer’s true identity.

I have two very rare first edition sets of the Twilight novels - one signed by Jessica as Stephanie and Bella, and one signed only by Bella.

It feels weird to have an agent. I still don’t think of myself as an actor. I’m an architect. I design eco friendly, ‘vegetarian vampire’ buildings. Despite having shot two movies now.
Today was amazing. Astonishing.

And I have NEVER been as angry as I have today.

The full trailer for my *Drawing of Three* was released a few weeks ago. We have been on press tours on and off since mid February. A few conventions, a few talk shows with teaser trailers. My face is out there now, and people have started asking me questions about my personal life. The fan response has been good so far. I look enough like everyone’s idea of Eddie that there hasn’t been any backlash. Not like what happened when the first of Bella’s books was turned into a movie, and the guy didn’t match the fan’s expectations.

Victoria warned me that as my fame grew, so would the crazy fan encounters and experiences would too.

She rang me laughing this morning to tell me that the crazy fan letters had officially kicked off. That some girl had sent a DNA report for her child claiming that we had met 15 years ago on some tour.

Victoria is lucky that she was in America while I was stuck in France.

Victoria is lucky that she still has a job.

Because, god help me, that email wasn’t a crazy fan letter. It was a piece of my past coming back. I thought I had lost it forever.

The email was from Lilly.

The girl from the tour.

The biggest mistake of my life.

The one that got away.
After I calmed down, I called Alice. I needed to follow it up. It couldn’t wait.

I finally had a name. Her full name.

Even her name sounded epic.

Lillian - purity and beauty
Delphine - the site of the oracle.
Haig - hedged enclosure.

So, Lilly, the girl I’ve been waiting for, is the pure, beauty, the site of the oracle, the hedged enclosure.

And my daughter, Isadora, she is a gift, jus like her name. She has my name as a middle name.

Both are names of power, and beauty. I wonder if Lilly kows their significance?

I was in awe of the girl fifteen years ago.

And then I googled her.

The girl I met all those years ago has nothing on the woman she is today. At 17 she was intellectually my superior in every way. Half way through a degree, travelling by herself, comfortable in her own skin, sexy as hell. At 32, she has her PhD, has held a tenured position at an Ivy League school.

She’s played in her university orchestras, including holding the lead chair position several times.

I’ve found at least 20 papers online that she has written.
She’s written a paper on Bella’s books.

She has a fifteen year old.

We have a fifteen year old.

I’m a father.

I’m a father whose daughter is starting college in a few weeks.

I’m a father whose daughter probably doesn’t need any fathering anymore.

Isadora Jasper Haig. Like her name, a gift.
Dear Isadora,

I have been writing this book for the last fifteen years, and I finally know who it is that I am writing it for. I am writing it for you, have been writing about my life so that you will know me.

Let me introduce myself.

My name is Jasper Brandon Whitlock. I am 34 years old, and I live in Seattle when I am at home. I live next door my sister, Alice, her wife Bella and their three girls, Tanya, Kate and Irina. They spend enough time at my apartment, that it’s like we live together still. Alice is my older sister, my best friend and your aunt. I am an architect by profession, but have just filmed my first two films *Drawing of Three* and *The Wastelands*. I have a contract signed for at least one more in this series. So, when I am not at home in Seattle, I am on location, or on tour promoting my film.

And, I am your father.

I have loved your mother for the last fifteen years.

I realize as I look back through this book that every important thing that has happened in my life has centered around various women. But, I love the experiences I had with every one of the amazing women whom I have told at least a small part of their stories. The women in my life have been so important. They have helped shape me, and without them I wouldn’t be who I am today. I’ve loved almost every one of the women I’ve written about, even if it was only for a minute. I love these women.

Please don’t judge me too harshly for that.

Without the women in my life, your mother included, I would not be the man I am today. I would not have gotten to this point.
So.

Deep breath in.

Exhale.

I am so pleased to know that you exist. I wish I had seen more of your life to this point. I’m so impressed to hear about you, to hear about your accomplishments. Your mother was extraordinary when I met her, and it sounds like you have followed in her footsteps. I am looking forward to meeting you.

I wish that my life was different, that I could just fly out and meet you guys immediately. But I can’t.

I want to meet you.

If you’d let me, can I call you? Or will you call me? My phone number is below. Please think about it. I know you don’t need me in your life. But I’d like to have you in mine. I feel that you could be the biggest chapter in this book.

You have three cousins. Tanya, Kate and Irina. Your grandparents passed away before you were born. They were amazing people who I would love to tell you about. Both my parents were only children, so I don’t have any cousins, so I have no extended family to introduce you too. Not by blood, anyway. But Carlisle and Esme are like second parents to me. Grandparents to you too, if you want. Their son Edward and their daughter, Rosalie. Rosalie’s husband, Emmett, and their six children, Olivia, Edwin, Scarlett, Jude, Caitlyn and Theodore. My sister’s wife Bella. My family is more than just the blood relations I have.

I know Alice has, by this stage, already met your mother. Hopefully she hasn’t scared her off with the whirlwind of energy she so often exhibits. I know that the rest of the family wants to meet you as well. I am away for another two months.

Two very long months.

If you want, they would love to meet you any time.
I’ve hit a point where I want to write so much more, but I don’t know what to say.

Your mother chose so well with your name. Isadora means gift, and you are the greatest gift I have ever been given.

Signing off,

To my once unknown reader, my daughter,

Thank you for coming into my life.

Lovingly, your father

Jasper.
Interlude three

Closing the book, Lise looked down at the chair she was sitting on. The proper names of furniture wasn't something she was particularly well versed in, but she thought the chair could probably be called a wingback chair. It had a peacock design. Jasper mentioned it in his diary. She wasn’t totally sure, but… well, she was sitting in Jasper’s chair. Jasper, who was Edward’s quasi uncle. The Edward in the book was probably her great grandfather. Which made Jasper her… Quasi great-great-great-uncle? And meant the chair was over eighty years old, if it was an antique when Jasper bought it.

Standing up, she carefully placed the books on the seat of the chair. The sun was sloping through the witches’ windows, low enough that it had to be late evening. She wasn’t feeling as angry anymore. The diaries were… well, they were interesting. Jasper’s diary made it clear that these people were her family.

Stretching, she reflected on how comfortable the chair was. She’d been sitting in it for over six hours, and didn’t feel the usual stiffness that came with sitting for such long periods of time. Perhaps she could figure out a way to move it down into her bedroom? The chair in there was… very pretty. But also very uncomfortable.

As she headed downstairs, Lise decided to stop into the media room. Wandering up to the bookshelves, she looked for the movies that Jasper had mentioned. The gunslinger movies. Assuming all of them were filmed, she guessed that there should be seven or eight boxes to look for.

Lise assumed that there was some sort of logic to how the DVD’s were catalogued. Her great grandfather was a meticulous, maddeningly precise person. She couldn’t imagine him just shoving them on the shelves willy-nilly. Whatever the logic behind his sorting system was, Lise couldn’t figure it out. Moving slowly around the room, she examined each of the shelves. In the shelf furthest from the door, two shelves up from the floor, Lise found the cases. Pulling out the box, she noted that there were eight movies. Although, for reasons she couldn’t figure out, they were numbered 1 to 4, 4.5, then 5 to 7. An odd way of numbering what she assumed was a complete tale, but there must have been some logic there.

Pulling out the case for movie two, The Drawing of Three, she looked at the photographs on the front. Of the two men on the front, it was clear who Jasper was. The other man was entrancing, with what she could only assume were enhanced blue eyes. No one could possibly have eyes that colour for real. The must be Roland.

The other man was handsome. Young looking in comparison.
Hearing her great grandfather begin to shuffle into the house, Lise quickly put everything back on the shelf and left the room. She didn’t feel like talking to her great grandfather, not yet at least.

The books felt like a secret. Something that was just hers. At least for a little while longer.

Before she lost the details she’d absorbed, she went into her bedroom and pulled out a blank notebook. She often had one with her to fill with sketches and doodles, but today she wanted to get out the family relationships she’d read about.

Two small family trees. Incomplete, and looking at them, Lise realised how little she knew about her family. She didn't know her great grandmother's name. Or what she did for a living. She knew her great grandfather had played the piano. But that was all. Sh didn't know her grandparent's names. She couldn't remember how many siblings they had.

More than that, though.

She realised she wanted to know.

Later that evening, after a silent dinner, and after her great grandfather had gone to bed, Lise went back into the media room. Pulling out the Drawing of Three case, she carefully turned it on.

Lise had never really been a fan of fantasy, or of westerns. She’d never seen a spaghetti western, or even heard of it as a genre. But by the end of the film, she knew she had to watch the full series, and read the books. The story was amazing. The acting was so good.

Jasper was amazing.

Who knew her relatives were actually cool?

Lise woke up early the next morning. She could hear her great grandfather’s snores echoing through the house. Slipping down to the kitchen, she grabbed a few pieces of fruit, and then headed back up the stairs to continue reading. She’d thought about bringing the diaries downstairs, but something about reading them in the attic just felt… right… to her.
Yesterday was my mother’s first day at her new job. A job she has taken so that she could be with me. So that I could go to the university of my choice.

I woke up yesterday morning, hoping to catch mum before she left for the day, hoping to wish her luck. Sitting on my dressing table were three books. Two were filled with writing, and one was totally blank. In the red book, I recognized my mother’s slightly messy, cramped handwriting. The navy book is filled with handwriting that slowly evolves, starting all long and loopy, slightly old fashioned looking, and becoming smaller and neater, more and more regular. The olive book was blank. All three books were totally new to me, and intriguing.

On top of the books, my mother had left me a letter, her handwriting traveling across the page comfortably, the slight scent of her perfume on the page.

I picked up the letter, and began to read. She told me about my fairee tale, about the books. Where they had come from and why she had given them to me.

Carefully putting her letter aside, I picked up her notebook, and began to read. I heard her come into my room, and I mumbled my wishes of luck for her first day. She put a plate of toast beside me, and left again. I was totally unaware of anything else until she got home again last night. I must have eaten the toast she left me, because the plate was empty, but I have no recollection of eating. I can’t remember eating dinner last night, or doing anything really.

I was transfixed by her story.

I kept reading well into the night, and once I had finished reading her book, I picked up the other one. The one she told me was written by my father. I kept reading, unaware of the passing time, until both books were finished, read cover to cover.

I don’t even know what time it was, but I know that I didn’t wake up this morning when mum left for work.

But, when I did wake up, I decided to take her advice, and to start to fill my own journal, to tell the parts of my childhood that are important to me. Because things that seemed so important to me don’t appear in her story, and I don’t want them to be lost in the ether.
The thought of the blank pages of the olive journal was both exhilarating and daunting, the feelings battling in my brain, in my stomach.

I don’t know how she ever managed it.

I mean, I have just read her story, and my dad’s and I don’t know how she managed to raise me, to go to school, to do anything that she did.

I have always known I was different. That my family situation was different. Mum has made no attempt to hide the truth from me, but in some ways I was happy in my blissful ignorance. I mean, I always knew that some families had both a mother and a father around, that there are grandparents and aunts and uncles, cousins. I never questioned this fact, and yet, I never really thought that these people were part of my reality. My reality is built around my mother, and the people she has shaped into our family. Nessa and Freja, Vere and Dyn and Leiya, Ad and Eli, Fern and Tabb, Brîska and Bala. They were my family, my cousins and uncles and aunts. They were the people I needed.

So, it is safe to say that I was a little shocked when she gave me the two journals. I knew that she had finally found my father, that she had met his sister, but I didn’t realize she had done all of this.

I guess I should backtrack a bit.

As I have said, I always knew that my family was different. I was five when we first moved to America. With the exception of a few brief snippets that mean almost nothing to me, this is my first concrete memory. I had been in kindergarten in Australia, half way through the year. Mum had told me that I was moving to grade one, and I remember being so excited. I remember her tutoring me so that I wasn’t behind my classmates, catching me up on the expected curriculum. I remember the plane journey from Australia, and how never ending it seemed. I remember being so overawed by the size of the plane, the airport, of getting to see the cockpit.

I remember the musicals we saw in New York, and my wonder at them. They were magical, amazing, entrancing. I don’t really remember getting from New York to Ithaca, but I remember going furniture shopping, finding the beds and tables at the antique store.

By the time we arrived in Ithaca, by the time that we had settled into our apartment, it all just seemed normal to me. I didn’t know that most people didn’t just pack up and leave, uproot themselves from their entire lives like my mother did.
I also didn’t know that most people don’t go directly into a PhD program the way she did. I had never really questioned what it was that she was studying. But, in hindsight, she is truly amazing. I mean, she did what takes most people over six years in three and a half.

I remember my first day at school, and how excited I was to be in first grade. I felt so grown up, so much like a big kid. My accent helped me make friends. It’s funny to think about now. I sound American. But I started out in this country sounding Aussie. I don’t know when I lost my accent, when it shifted from the Australian accent my mother still speaks in, to the American accent I now have. A few traces remain, and I stubbornly continue to refer to my mother as ‘mum,’ not the American ‘mom.’

I don’t remember meeting Freja, and Nessa. Not really. But, as soon as I started spending one afternoon a week at their house, and Freja spent an afternoon a week at ours, it seemed normal. Like it had always happened.

I do remember the first time I went around to their house though. Mum and I have never had a television. We would sometimes watch movies on her laptop, curled up in one of our beds, but never a television. So, when I got to Freja’s, I was stunned. I don’t think I had really done many play dates in Australia, because I don’t really remember anyone having a TV. I was amazed to see one in Freja’s house, and a bit unsure what it was. I think we watched a couple of shows that afternoon, but none of them appealed to me. I wanted to play with Freja’s dolls, her stuffed animals, to ride her bike. Basically, I wanted to do anything but watch TV. Freja once commented about our lack of TV when she was at our apartment, but it never really bothered us when we were playing. In fact, I think we became better friends because we didn’t just sit in front of the TV like blobs.

That first Christmas break, my mother tutored again me, so I could move up to the second grade. I was so excited to be in class with Freja. It didn’t ever occur to me that this wasn’t normal, that most people started in kindergarten and completed full years of school, that most people didn’t skip years. All that I knew was that I got to learn harder stuff, that I got to be in class with Freja.

I remember mum tutoring me the next summer, and going into grade four. This too just seemed normal to me. In hindsight, my mother is amazing, and there is no way that I could have achieved what I have without her. I was lucky in that class. I made friends immediately, and they have remained some of my best friends to this day. They helped me through middle school and high school, helped me when I clearly didn’t fit in physically with the other kids.

My memories of the early years in Ithaca are sketchy at best. I remember things here and there, but it’s mostly a blur.

A happy blur.
I have never seen my mother without her ice blue jasper pendent. It hangs low on her body, between the swell of her breasts, where her heart sits. When she picked me up as a small child, it would swing, the topaz on the setting flashing in the light. It sat just above her watch, both hidden under her shirts most of the time.

She told me once that she paid for it with her first pay cheque from Abaigael. The one and only thing she had splurged on. She had commissioned it, and the topaz was her birth stone. The flower, set delicately above the triangular jasper setting, was a day lily she said. The jasper was the color of his eyes. And, the color of mine. She said that it made her feel like a part of him was still with us, and it reminded gave her something tangible to think of. When she was thinking of how he was still in her heart.

Some of my strongest memories of my early childhood are food related. Mum cooks amazingly, and her food was always better than fast food. Honestly, I don’t like fast food now. It all feels so fake. I guess my body just isn’t used to them. My friends were always so impressed with the dinners my mother prepared, the fact that we would sit around a table together to eat, the amount of food she made from scratch.

One of my favorite things was making yogurt. We had this machine that would make six small tubs of yogurt, and we would flavor it according to what we had available from the garden and cupboard, and freezer. We would buy fruit in bulk when it was cheap, during the summer months. We would make awesome fruit leather, and freeze it, along with berries, pitted cherries, and stewed fruits. My favourite yogurt was made with lemon and lime zest.

I remember when my mother decided that she wanted to keep growing vegetables and herbs. I remember the search to find collapsible growing bags. I remember the search to find a small compost bin to put on our balcony, and the fun I used to have, rolling the compost bin ball around to mix the contents. I remember her excitement when she found upside down tomato planters, and her joy when she started potting everything out and using them. We were lucky, and our land lord approved us putting hooks into the ceiling so we could hang the planters. Mum covered the area underneath the collapsible planters, and the upside down planters with a large plastic sheet so that nothing could stain the balcony. Mum turned the balcony into a mini greenhouse, and we were able to grow things there all year long, even when I was bitter and snowing outside.

As the plants slowly grew, it became exciting to see what was ready to pick, what we could harvest and eat. Freja joined in on the fun, and was possibly more excited than either mum or me. I think mum had had a similar system in Australia, so I had vague memories of having vegetables growing in the house as something normal. For Freja, it was all new. She eventually convinced Nessa to let her have a box of her own, and delighted at growing carrots and potatoes.
Mum grew tomatoes, beans, potatoes, carrots, basil, parsley, mint, pak choi, rhubarb, eggplant, capsicum, cucumber, chives, spinach, silverbeet, beetroot, rosemary, thyme, zucchini and squash. We had mushrooms in a box under the sink, and strawberries. The strawberries were always my favourite.

It wasn’t until a few years ago that I realised my mother had vegetables growing all year. That we never really went without fresh vegetables from the garden, even though most vegetables have a limited growing season. She explained that she used UV lights in the greenhouse, and these helped to keep the plants growing all year. She also installed the UV lights in the living room, and said the lights stopped her getting SADS. Growing up in Australia, she was used to a far higher level of sunshine, for longer in the year. Moving to America, especially the north where it liked to snow, mum just didn’t get enough sunlight without the UV lights, and would get really depressed over winter without them.

I remember my mother teaching me to cook. She loved home prepared meals, and was willing to spend several hours on a meal if needed. Mostly she cooked simple, quick foods - stir fries, casseroles, curries and soups. But, at least once a month, she would make pasta from scratch, kneading the dough, mixing the ingredients. I would help, and some time around my tenth birthday, I started making the pasta by myself.

I remember her teaching me to use the sharp knives in our kitchen. She explained that they were more dangerous if they were blunt, and that they were more dangerous if you didn’t know how to use them. She started me off small, peeling and dicing apples, before moving on to more complex, fiddly, or hard tasks. By my eleventh birthday, I was able to use the huge furi knives, dicing onions, julienning carrots, carving roasts. My friends were amazed, both by my ability to cook and my proficiency with the knives. Most of them were barely allowed to touch knives, even when their parents were hovering over their shoulders. Mum, however, had decided that I was competent, and that I knew enough basic first aid if I ever cut myself. Because, even top chefs sometimes get their fingers, not the food.

I don’t think I ever really understood just how hard my mother had worked during my childhood. I mean, I know she worked hard. But she always gave me time, as much time as I wanted. When she told me not to worry about money affecting my college choice, I didn’t really think about it. I assumed that my grades would get me in, and then I’d just have to get loans or whatever. I never thought that she had put together a college fund for me, that she had been working a second job since she graduated from university so she could pay for me to go to college. And I had never imagined that the college fund could be over $212,000. The amount is huge. Enough to easily cover my Ivy education, leaving me debt free at the end of my studies. Mum reckons that it was easy, that she never regretted doing it, and that it was bolstered by some money from her own college fund, money that she didn’t spend during her PhD. But still, it is a phenomenal thing for her to have done for me. Especially now that I have a scholarship that covers the full cost of tuition.

But still, she says the money is mine. That I should use it to buy a house, go traveling with it. Of course, I will have to do things like pay for text books and stuff like that, but the things I have to
pay for are really not going to make a big difference on the balance of the account. I don’t even know where to begin. So for now, it is just going to hang out, gathering interest, and having small amounts withdrawn so I can buy my books.

I’m too young to do anything else with it.

School was easy for me, and I don’t think I even really tried until I reached high school. Suddenly, I was in the AP and honors pathway, and everything was challenging. It made me use my brain, and I loved it. Of all my years of schooling to date, I think my senior year was the best. I was taking AP classes, and surrounded by people who loved to learn just as much as I did.

But, at the same time, I was in love with cheerleading. I know that it sounds really girly, and prissy or whatever, but it’s the truth. I may have been excelling academically, but I wanted more. I tried out with Maddie, and we both got into the reserve team. I got to perform at games three times the first year I was on the squad. I don’t think I have ever begged mum for anything as much as I had to beg her to let me try out for the squad. At the time, I didn’t really understand her fears, but now, I guess I understand a bit better. I was so tiny then, and I still am, really. With all the years I had skipped, I was so much smaller than the rest of my team mates.

Which, I guess, is why, in my second year, I became a flyer. Early in my freshman year, I had been told it was a possibility. So, I had to work on my body, to learn the stretches, flexibility, and strength that was needed. Because I was so young, the coach had me work without weights, using my own body as the mass. The older girls sometimes used weights in their workouts, but I was told that I was too young to use them yet. And, in hindsight, the coach was right. I could have done some serious damage to my bones and muscles if I had used weights too young. So, the coach basically used gymnastics methods on me.

In our cheer squad, we were really lucky. The school wrestling team had this agreement with us that went along the lines of ‘to be on the wrestling team, you also had to be on the cheerleading team.’ So, we had more boys than any of the other teams nearby. I think the strong boys made mum feel safer about me being a flyer. They were huge and strong, capable of holding our full weight on one hand.

I loved flying. I loved the sense of weightlessness when I was tossed, the discipline needed for our carefully choreographed routines. And, in turn, I loved the boys who made me fly. The cheerleaders introduced me to the football and basketball players, star athletes. They became like big brothers to me, and there was always a boy walking me between classes, making sure I wasn’t squished by the rest of the school. Walking next to a wrestler, a footballer or a basketballer keeps someone as small as me nice and safe.

The girls on the squad became some of my favourite friends, but then, so did the geeks in my other
classes, the musos in the orchestra. I think I managed to span most of the groups. Everyone seemed to know my name, and I think I knew ninety five percent of my year.

Like the vegetable growing, and the composting (I have never once seen my mother use the grinder on the sink), there are other things that she has taken across from her life in Australia. She has been here over eight years now, but still thinks like an Australian in many ways.

For most of her childhood, my mother grew up in a drought zone. She may have lived in a city with town water, but she once told me the stories of the fires that ravaged the city one year, of the low dam levels, of the excitement she felt whenever it rained. Of the brown and dusty fields near her house, of windrows holding soil in place on hills and extreme water restrictions. The drought during her formative years was so influential on her that she still thinks that way. As if she still lives in a drought zone. She still uses water sparingly, and I am the only person I know who has a dual flush toilet. Apparently they are the norm in Australia, but here, they are something of a rarity. She convinced the land lords in Ithaca to install them in our apartment, and when we moved into our new house in Providence, one of the first things she did was have all the toilets converted to dual flush. She also insisted on having rain water tanks installed, and a grey water system put in. She says that we will have the healthiest, most fruitful lemon tree, if it gets the water from the washing machine and our showers. She has never lied to me, so I have no reason to doubt her.

My mother insists on using Australian spellings, even now. She puts u’s in lots of words, words like honour and colour, that I wouldn’t. She uses s’s in place of z’s, making problematize into problematise, and she insists that you go ‘through’ things. Before she handed her thesis in, mum had Nessa read the entire thing, and mark every time she had used an Australian spelling, not the American one she should be using.

I love my mother. I think that her being so young when she had me has made us closer than we would have been otherwise. But reading her story, our story, I amazed at her strength. Her strength is the reason that I told her fairee tale as part of my valedictorian speech, is the reason I have accomplished what I have.

I am constantly amazed at what she has achieved. I knew that we went traveling when I was just a few months old, but never really understood how difficult that must have been for her. I have seen the pictures, the ones with me in a sling, and mum doing the one handed camera trick. But, I never really took in the distance that she travelled, a single mother with a newborn.

And, I never knew the strength it must have taken to walk away from her parents. I never questioned that my grandparents were not part of my life. But, it must have hurt, must have been so difficult to walk away from them. She was so young, and they didn’t support her. They didn’t support me. I asked mum about it, and she says that she is still in contact with some family friends who met me, didn’t judge her while we were in Australia. That her parents are still alive, still doing their missionary work, and refuse to acknowledge the existence of a daughter or granddaughter. It
is their loss.

Because my mother is awesome.
Book Three (Olive) Chapter 2: Childhood

It’s strange the things that you remember. If you asked me a week ago, I don’t think I could have
told you much about my childhood. I would have been able to tell you the normal stuff, the I went
to school, I had friends, I trick or treated, I lived with my mother, I played piano and violin, I was a
cheerleader.

All interesting, but none of it really able to paint any sort of detail about my childhood.

But today, today I remember so much more. I guess that is to be expected, after reading mum’s
version of my life. But it’s weird, things she didn’t even talk about have been triggered, things I
haven’t thought about in forever.

The biggest thing I remember was how happy my childhood was. I was never really aware of how
hard Mum worked. Of the sacrifices she made. Of anything other than happiness.

My childhood was filled with love, and it was perfect.

I remember going trick or treating for the first time. I didn’t really understand why I was excited,
but Freja’s enthusiasm was so contagious. I was excited about dressing up, but didn’t really get
why we were dressing up, why we were going to wander about the streets in costume. Freja and I
were totally obsessed with fairees that year. So, it seemed perfectly logical to us that we would go
as fairees, and that mum and Nessa would dress up too. We pestered them for days about it, until
they finally agreed to dress up, to go trick or treating with us. So, the four of us went trick or
treating. I don’t even remember how I got home that night, I think I had eaten so much sugar that I
passed out somewhere on the way home. But it was so thrilling! So exciting to go to someone’s
house, and have them give you candy. Or, as mum insists on calling them, lollies.

Every year after that, I would go trick or treating with Freja. I don’t know where our costumes
came from that first year, I guess mum and Nessa bought them, but after that, mum made them. In
the weeks leading up to Halloween, I would see her sitting in front of her sewing machine, the
needle whirring up and down the scraps of fabric magically becoming a costume. And each year,
they became more and more elaborate, especially after she finished her PhD.

While we were packing up the apartment to move here, I found them all again. Mum had carefully
folded them, storing them in the Chinese step shelves in her room. Looking at them again, I
realised the love she had put into each of the costumes, into each of the years. They were all so
much better quality than anything we could have bought, better finished, more original.
Freja and Nessa became part of our Christmases. Mum has always said that Christmas was a time for family. That family is more than blood. We do two meals - one of Christmas Eve, for the Polish side of our family tree, and one of Christmas Day, for the English. Both of them are special, but the Christmas Eve dinner has always felt like the real Christmas to me. Mum cooks things that she doesn’t do at any time of the year. We stay up late - usually til after midnight. I’m allowed a sip of port with dessert. Christmas Day is special too. We do presents on Christmas Day. Never more than four. Something you want, Something you need, Something to wear, and Something to read. It always felt like enough to me. I never felt like I was missing out.

Its weird the things that stick in the mind. I remember the music that was always playing, always there in the background. Mum never seemed to be home without something in the background, playing under our conversations and behind our studies. There is a term for it - lisztomania - one of those quasi made up but real words, which has a bunch of meanings, but mostly now refers to the need to listen to music all the time. Her tastes were eclectic, encompassing classical, pop, oldies, electronic, dubstep, drum and bass, jazz, and more. Top forties was played next to heavy metal and folk and pop and rock. She never seemed to acknowledge genre, playing it all in this beautiful jumble. I grew up with a love of music that none of my friends had ever heard of, music that I now find soothing and comforting. Music that reminds me of the feeling of home.

In my first week of high school, mum gave me her version of the sex talk. Oh my god, that was so very, very, highly, intensely embarrassing. For both of us. But, I think it was good. I know friends of mine who don’t have the kind of relationship with their parents that I have with mum, who couldn’t talk about sex with them.

Mum, I think, was mortified the entire conversation. Not surprisingly. She is extremely shy, blushes easily, and I don’t think she has had sex since I was conceived. Her notebook kinda confirmed that. I’m so glad neither of them went into much detail about that. I mean, I know they had to have sex to have me. But it would be weird, right, reading about your parents having sex? Mum at least knew she was writing for me. Dad, Jasper (I don’t know what to call him… awkward) didn’t though. He just had the book given to him by his big sister. My aunt. I have an aunt... I’ve never had a blood relation aunt before...

Anyway, the sex talk. Mum had skipped grades, and so she knew what it was like to be surrounded by people who were developing physically and sexually around you. The talk was, well, excruciating and embarrassing and eye opening. I had never really considered sex before that, or considered my own orgasm. Mum, however, drilled into me that my own orgasm was important, just as important as the guy’s. And that consent was important, that I could say no any time, that my wishes had to be respected. That if I said yes, and changed my mind, the guy could not change that. It was my choice. And similarly, if he guy said no, I had to respect that. Both of these lessons have stayed with me, and will stay with me. Not, of course, that I’ll get to use them for at lease another two years. But, hey, two years is less than the three I would have to wait in New York. Yay for Rhode Island having a lower age of consent.
Mum was so insistent about the orgasm that I got really curious. And, of course, she had given me a vibrator.

The experience was… interesting… and exhilarating. Mum was right, I had never really felt anything like it. I don’t even have the words to describe what it felt like. But, so not what I was expecting.

When I was maybe nine, mum and I went on a day hike. Just along the trails near Ithaca, but still, a hike. I’d never really done anything like it, and to my memory, neither had mum. As we walked, she slowly began to tell me things about her own childhood. She didn’t tell me about my grandparents, and I had always thought they were a closed subject. I didn’t ask. Instead, she started to tell me about how she had been part of something called the Duke of Edinburgh Award, or DofE. The way she said it, the sounds all collided, and I thought she said DV to start with. About how she used to go hiking with friends of hers, as part of the award. As we walked, I didn’t even notice how far we were going, the hills we were climbing, I was so enthralled by her story. It was rare for her to tell me much about her life in Australia, her life before I was born. I hung off every word, desperate to know more about my mother, the amazing woman in front of me. She told me about the places she had been, the beauty, serenity and silence that hiking gave. She told me of the day where the tent zips froze shut, and they had to wait in them until the weak winter sunshine melted the frost, allowing them to exit the tent. She told me of the tiny huts that she had visited, of the isolation and solitude that they provided. Of the visitors books that were at all the huts, and the comments people left. She told me of sleeping in a church yard, of sleeping under the stars.

She told me these stories, and more. I was so wrapped up in listening to her speak, I don’t think I even noticed when we reached the lookout, when we sat down for lunch, when we started back down the trail. I was spellbound by the quiet peace she was painting, the bits of information about her childhood that I was learning. I think I loved my mother a bit more after that day. She was my mum, but more than that, she was my hero.

Music is such a part of Mum’s life. Not just listening, but playing too. The most expensive thing I think she has ever owned, until we bought the house, is her viola. I guess her parents let her keep it when she moved out. Or maybe she just never gave it back after her time in England. I don’t know. But I grew up with the sounds of mum practicing early in the morning. I was allowed in the room with her, but I had to be careful, respectful of the viola. Mum isn’t a naming person, but she told me that the viola had a soul. That she had to keep playing it to keep it alive. That we had to be careful, because it was fragile, and we didn’t want to hurt it. When I got my own violin, I was so scared to hold it, because I thought I would hold it too hard and break the soul. I never did, but it still scares me.

Twice a year, the university orchestra would hold a concert. Mum played in the orchestra every year that we lived in Ithaca. I really hope she joins the one here, she seems to love it so much. When I was little, I would often wake up to the sounds of her running scales up and down the instrument, warming her fingers before starting practicing the orchestral repertoire. When I got older, she would wake me up just before she started her practice, so that I could start my own. I
still love the violin, and the piano. But, mum. As mum spent longer and longer in the orchestra, her technical abilities improved, and eventually, she was appointed the lead chair. She was so thrilled that day, she splurged and we went out to a restaurant for dinner. Something we very rarely did, because she was always so careful with money, so careful to save and budget. I think we worked backwards, and started with desert that night, something she had never let me do before.

Two years ago, she was asked to do a solo. Bela Bartok’s viola concerto. Haunting, virtuosic, beautiful, and accompanied by full orchestra. She was thrilled and terrified at the thought of performing it. The orchestra usually only had music students perform the concertos, but this year, they were showcasing the faculty members of the orchestra, players such as my mother. She practiced harder, more often than I had ever seen. She taped herself, listened to herself, basically dedicated herself to the task of playing the piece perfectly, unhesitatingly, from memory.

The concert hall was packed. I had never seen it so full for one of the concerts before. The orchestra has a loyal fan base, but classical music is so out of style it was rare to have the venue sell out. This time, however, it not only sold out, but was standing room only. I went, as I always did, with Nessa and Freja. As we took our seats, I was amazed at the sheer numbers in the audience. When Mum came out, I understood why the hall was filled. The cheer she got was almost deafening. We were surrounded by her students, current and former. She blushed with embarrassment and nerves when she realised that most of the audience was there for her, that people who had never been to a classical concert before were there to watch her play.

But, as soon as she started playing, it all evaporated, her nerves, her shyness, her embarrassment. She once told me that when she played, she was given a shield to hide behind. The shield was her instrument, the notes that the composers had written for her to play. When she started playing, she became another person, became this amazing performer. One who pulled faces, played with passion and soul, and beauty. I don’t think I had ever heard my mother play so beautifully, or, for that matter, solo. She outshone every other performer that evening.

I was so proud of her, amazed at her accomplishments, her talent, her soul. Later that night, she confessed that her second choice, had she not studied psychology and gender studies, would have been a music degree. But, the university she did her undergrad degree at didn’t have a great music department. She would have had to move to Sydney or Melbourne, and she really didn’t want to do that. And, didn’t think that she could do that, not at such a young age. Her parents wouldn’t have moved. Music was a frivolous pursuit in their eyes. Something to do as a child because ‘it helped with grades’ but not something to pursue as a career. If her parents didn’t move, she didn’t think any of the university housing would have accepted her because she was so young. So, she did the psych and gender degree. And hasn’t regretted it. She told me that if she had done the music degree, she probably wouldn’t have met Jasper, and I never would have been born.

So, I guess I’m glad that she didn’t study music.
When I was maybe seven, mum gave me a piece of advise that I don’t fail to live by. It was the reason I joined cheerleading, the reason I worked so hard throughout school, why I chose Providence and Brown, why I encouraged her to write to Jasper.

She told me that whatever I do in life, I should do it with no regrets.

And so, I do. I don’t regret a single one of my decisions, and I hope that she too lives by this, that she doesn’t regret any of hers.

Probably the last memory that I can count as part of my childhood was prom. Held the night after graduation, it was amazing. I felt like a princess, like the princess from mum’s fairytale.

I know that the typical thing to happen at proms was to vote for king and queen, and for them to share the traditional ‘first dance’ about halfway into the night. Our school had slightly different traditions. I had been named valedictorian, and our school tradition meant that the ‘first dance’ was something I had to do. With any person I picked.

I had known for months that I would be named valedictorian. I know that sounds really conceited, but it’s the truth. One of my best male friends, Steve, was my only competition, and he had told me outright there was no way he was going to beat me. I told him at the time I didn’t believe him, but truth was, I knew that he was right. My GPA was 4.23, and his was never more than 4.1. So, I had known for months that I would have to do the first dance.

So, I had talked my mother into teaching me how to dance. She was good. When we lived in Australia, she had taken dance classes, and when we moved to Ithaca, she stopped. When I asked her about it, when I was maybe seven, she told me that the dance style that she did didn’t have any classes in the area. I asked her my she didn’t teach it, then. The idea seemed to simmer in her brain, and once she finished her PhD, she started teaching modern jive at one of the local dance studios. Her classes were small to start with, but as the word of mouth got around, they became bigger and bigger. After about two years, she outgrew the dance studio, and had to move the classes to a large, ballroom sized room at a club. By that stage, she was holding two lessons a week, and had teachers trained to help her.

So, I knew that she would be able to teach me to dance, and dance well.

I knew it was really early to be asking people to prom, but three months before hand, I asked one of the boys on the cheer squad, Xavier. He wasn’t a wrestler, instead doing it because he genuinely wanted to be part of the squad. So, he wasn’t as scarily huge like some of the other guys. But, like all the other guys on the squad, he was still big. His girlfriend, Mackenzie, had graduated the year
before, and moved down to NYC to go to school. As soon as we were done for the year, he was going to move down to live with her. He spent most of his senior year pining over her, spending way too much on phone calls. If he hadn’t been on the squad, I think he would have been in New York every weekend, but with games and everything, he couldn’t.

Before I asked him, I talked to Mackenzie. I had gotten to know her a little bit in my junior year, because she attended every cheer practice, every game we cheered at. She wasn’t on the squad, but was happy to support Xav. I checked with her that it was okay to ask her boyfriend to prom. She said it was fine, that she had taken him last year, and had the memories of that day to keep. And, she had a huge exam that day, so was going to have to rush back to the city after the graduation ceremony. And, actually, it would be so good for him to go with me, because she didn’t want him to go alone, to spend his prom pining. So, I asked him. I knew we would have a good time, and that his girlfriend didn’t mind.

In asking him to prom, I also asked if he would learn how to dance with me. To my complete surprise, he agreed, claiming he would love to surprise Kenzie with his ability to dance. He requested we learn how to waltz, and I wanted to learn to modern jive. Between the two of them, we could probably dance to almost all the songs that played.

So, mum started to teach us. We went to a few of her classes, but mainly she gave us private tuition. Some of our friends found out what we were doing, and decided that they would go to the ceroc classes as well. Decided that they actually wanted to be able to dance, not just do the silly sway shuffle thing.

With the private tuition we got from mum, Xav and I progressed rapidly, and thanks to some of the stuff we had learnt in cheer, we were able to include a few ariels in the routine too. The tradition of the school was that the valedictorian couple would dance to at least a minute of a song before other couples were invited to the floor. Knowing that my friends were learning to dance, I managed to get it arranged that Xav and I would be given a full dance before other couples were invited up, and to a song of our choice. The other people learning to dance would trickle onto the floor, and after the song was over, then the rest of the school would be invited up. The teachers were more than happy to follow my request, telling me that the couple got such a short dance usually because they didn’t want any more, that they never really knew how to dance, and were really self conscious about it.

So, it was set. The song I picked was an old one, but good. One of my favourites. One of the ones on the playlist that was always in the background at our apartment. Wade in the Water, by Eva Cassidy. Xav and I had arranged that we would dance for the first two verses by ourselves, and then our friends would trickle onto the floor.

So, on the day of the prom, I was nervous, and excited, eager to dance, and petrified that I would screw up.
My dress, something mum had made for me, was loose enough that I could dance easily, and beautiful. It was 1950s inspired, strapless, and stopped just below my knees. The skirt was full, and the bodice fitted. There was a thick waistband of black lace, and the dress was a deep red satin. It had matching lace underskirts, and was perfect. Mum even managed to talk Xav into wearing a matching waistcoat, so that he matched in the photos. And, being the good sport he was, he agreed.

There were a group of about twenty of us who had a pre prom party, gathering at one of our houses, and posing for endless photos for our excited parents. We had all decided not to do the limo thing, instead having our parents drive us (I know, uncool, but, hey, cheaper, so we could spend more on our dresses). Five of the fathers had volunteered to drive, and they had decked out the convoy of cars like wedding cars, but with hot pink and fluro blue ribbons rather than the traditional wedding white. The same fathers would pick us up after the prom, and take us to the post prom sleepover, the last event we would attend as a group. Xav, and three others, were leaving two days after prom, and I would be gone a week later. We all felt the tug of the end of high school, and wanted to prolong it as much as possible.

The photos from the pre party are gorgeous. Mum had bought Nessa and Freja to the party with her, and Nessa seemed to be the dedicated photographer of me. Mum, on the other hand, quietly wandered around, taking candid photos of parents and kids. The photos she took are amazing, and everyone at the party was thrilled to receive them.

We all looked fabulous. Most of the girls, knowing that they would be dancing, had decided on knee length dresses, and had made up for the lack of length with amazing shoes. Most of the dresses, like mine, were full skirted, and the photos of the girls almost look like something straight out of the 1950s. Mum took a few sepia photos, of the girls, and they really remind me of something like Pleasantville.

Our prom started with a sit down dinner, three courses, before the dancing. Like any catered food, it was fairly boring, predictable. Beef or chicken, or vegetarian. The one thing I liked was that we had to choose our preference several days beforehand, so we were at least given a meal we would eat.

And, after the desert had been cleared, the dancing began. Xav and I made our way to the floor, and as the music began, we started to dance. Mum had choreographed a routine for us to do, one that matched the music, and flowed beautifully. As we went through the routine, I slowly saw my friends drift onto the floor, and soon there were ten couples dancing, whirling around.

I had asked Steve to video it all, so that I could see it later, so that mum could see it later. True to his word, he did, and it looked truly impressive.
The prom was amazing, and magical. I spent time with so many of my friends, people from all of the social clicks, talking and laughing and dancing. At the post prom sleepover, there was more talking and laughing, and hugs and tears. Most of us had been friends since middle school, some earlier, and it was going to be sad when we all parted ways.

So, we cried, and hugged (even the boys shed a few tears). I don’t think anyone actually slept that night. I slept most of the next day. I’m sure most of my friends did as well.

And, with that, high school was over. Mum and I were moving to Providence, my friends were scattering, and we would probably never all be in the same place at the same time again.

We were growing up, and childhood had ended.
The year passed kinda quickly after the premier. Dad finished his press obligations, and came to stay with us for a few weeks.

And by stay, I mean he was in our house, and in Mum’s bed.

Kinda inevitable I guess, after seeing their reunion.

It was nice to spend time with him like that. Without the rest of the family around. Without Alice and her whirlwind energy.

With Dad came a car. He insisted on buying it. Mum argued, and lost. He thought that it was time we got one. Mum can drive here (even if she says she hates it). And we live further from campus these days. And he had so many arguments. But his trump card was this: he has missed out on so many years. So many parts of our lives. He has lived an easy life where he has never wanted for anything. Mum has struggled. So, please let him do this one thing for us.

I doubt it’s going to be just one thing.

But he is here.

Mum is so happy.

Esme invited us for Christmas.

We fly there on the 23rd.

Mum agreed, reluctantly, to let them pay for flights again.

In return, she insisted on cooking a traditional Australian Polish Christmas Eve dinner.
So, she spent the weeks leading up to Christmas cooking and freezing food. Our luggage is going to be mostly food, I’m sure. She’s sent Alice a list of things to get. It’s a very specific list. I should know. I’ve been sent to get items from it in the past.

*****

So, Christmas Eve Eve, we were on a plane. Bags full of pierogi and barczsz and uszka and other things. And fruit mince and fruit mince pie pastry (because they just don’t travel once they’re cooked. And store bought aren’t right). And who knows what else. I just left her to it, really.

Dad won’t be able to come back with us in the New Year. So he and Mum are making the most of the next few nights. We are staying in Dad’s apartment, but I’m planning on spending more time next door in Alice and Bella’s place. Mum and Dad really are like teenagers. I do not need to see that.

But.

So. We arrived in Seattle, and Alice was waiting for us. Dad took her car keys, and insisted on driving. Alice pouted, and Mum looked relieved. We drove into the city, and parked in a crazy expensive looking building. I mean, there was a gated car park. Underground. And then took the elevator to the top floor.

Yeah.

There’s just a bit of money on that side of the family.

Walking into Dad’s apartment was like walking into my house. Into home. Whatever. It felt familiar and right and like we had been there a hundred times before.

He and Mum have the same design aesthetic. There wasn’t a single piece of furniture that I couldn’t see in our house, and vice versa.

Have you ever walked in somewhere you’ve never been before, and it was home?
This was that place for me.

Mum, of course, immediately took over his kitchen. By the time people arrived for dinner on Christmas Eve, she had cooked fifteen dozen fruit mince pies. There were more salads and plated cold smoked fish platters than fridge space. We had used most of Alice and Bella’s kitchen and fridges as well.

It smelled like Christmas, and childhood and home in there to me.

It was perfect.

The meal was fun, too.

It’s the biggest we’ve ever done.

Mum and me and Dad.

Alice and Bella and Tanya and Irina and Kate.

Rosalie and Emmett and Olivia and Edwin and Scarlet and Jude and Caitlyn and Theodore.

Esme and Carlisle and Edward.

Angela and Ben.

Vere and Dynn and Leiya.

Ad and Eli and their son Franklin.

Alice surprised us by flying Vere and Dynn and Leiya, and Ad and Eli and Franklin across. Called it her Christmas gift.
And, well, it’s a good thing that mum has no ability to cater the correct quantity. We had six extra people, and we still had too much food.

Dad has this amazing table that comfortably sat all of us. He said he fell in love with it, and it always felt like an extravagance. He barely eats at home, in this apartment, even when he is in Seattle.

But today, he said, it made sense. He understood the purpose.

Christmas Day was even bigger. Esme hosted, and… I think there were thirty five people there? Family and friends and… I dunno. Not everyone was there for the dinner portion of the evening, that was largely a repeat of the guest list from Christmas Eve. But there were afternoon drinks with people, and evening things… and I’ve been eating for forty-eight hours, I swear.

It was weird, though. Weird not to have Christmas with our Ithaca family. Weird to experience other people’s traditions.

By the end of the evening, I could see that Mum needed to go home. She’d hit her limit of people, of noise. There’s this look she gets… it’s like she disconnects. She’s so introverted that people are overwhelming in large groups. I was maybe ten when I figured that out. But she likes people. In small doses. But it’s like she’s a box, and over the day it fills with people and experiences. And she likes everything in the box, but once it’s full, she can’t hold anything more and she kinda checks out.

This is definitely the biggest noisiest thing she’s done in a very long time.

So, we made our excuses, and Dad drove us home.

It might be the best Christmas I’ve ever had.

*****

Dad and I still talk weekly on the phone. He’s on location again, filming. He and Mum talk every day. I tell him about my classes, about cheerleading.
He’ll be home for the summer, but has to stay in Seattle.

He’s invited me to stay for the summer.

Mum has summer courses to teach, and can’t come.

I want to go.

I don’t want to leave her alone.

*****

So, Seattle is big.

Like,

I knew it was a city, but the time we spent there over Christmas was so filled with family and events, and well, just, like, hanging around the apartment.

I didn’t see much of the city.

Now, though, the days are so long. My favourite place in the whole apartment is watching the harbor from Dad’s balcony. It’s so amazing up there. Emmett landscaped it at some point, and it is covered with fruit trees, and vegetable vines and plants. Flowers. Vines. There is both a jasmine and a wisteria plant in the rooftop garden. It smells so amazing.

I can see Mum spending a lot of time on the roof when she gets here. Three more weeks. Just 21 days. Her class will be over, then she’s coming. And she will sit in the garden.

This amazing rooftop garden.

There’s even a beehive.
Yeah. My Dad and his family have a bee hive.

Apparently someone comes and cares for it, and it’s an ‘ethical’ hive that uses some fancy method of honey collection that means that you don’t have to remove the honeycomb, it just kinda drips out?

*****

Rosalie’s offered to teach me to drive.

I’m still too young to learn in Rhode Island, but I can learn here it seems.

I’m kinda scared. I mean, she’s so… I dunno. She works on cars, and she looks like a model, and she doesn’t say much, and she seems so intimidating.

But.

I want to learn.

*****

Rosalie is an amazing teacher. She’s so patient and kind. I’m glad I said yes.

It’s not as hard as I thought it would be.

We spend about an hour a day practicing. Sometimes she comes and picks me up, sometimes Dad or Alice or Bella drives me to the garage.

I prefer it when Dad and Bella drive me to the garage.
Alice is terrifying. Although her car is so beautiful.

It’s really cool to see the girls at the garage. All girls most days I go in. They’re all doing internships and projects there over the summer break. Most of them are in high school, or starting college in the fall. They’ve decided that I’m one of them, even if I don’t know what any of the things in the car do.

Rosalie is an amazing teacher. I like spending time with her, too.

She’s so strong, but in a different way to Mum.

She tells me stories about Dad and his antics over the years. How loving he was to Olivia, and how he’s like a dad to the triplets.

How sad he was… is… to have missed out on my childhood.

*****

Mum has arrived, and I picked her up from the airport!

Well. I drove there. AND I drove back.

Rosalie was sitting next to me, of course.

I can drive….

I missed Mum so much.

****

My parents are gross and disgusting.
They are adults! They should not be acting like teenagers.

****

Edward arrived back in Seattle today.

We’ve been emailing every few days since the premier.

He’s funny. And smart.

And ….

I think I have a crush.

Is it weird that I have a crush???

Like… I know we aren’t related by blood.

But he’s kinda my family.

He’s part of my Dad’s family…

Oh, this is just too screwed up.

*****

You know what, it doesn’t matter.
Because.

He’s amazing.

And he likes me back.

We kissed for the first time today.

It feels big and important and monumental. Frightening and exciting and scary.

I’m…

Floating

*****

We have to go home tomorrow. Classes start in two weeks, and Mum has to be back to prep. Dad has to go to his next location. Edward is going back to school.

I don’t want to leave this bubble. It’s been amazing spending time here. Spending time with Dad, and getting to know my family.

But the best part has been getting to know Edward. Properly. In person. And kissing him. I had my first kiss this summer. I learnt to drive.

Definitely more than a crush…

Can you be in love at 15?
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!