

# Rising Star

## PROLOGUE

Dreams have always been the catalyst that led me down the path I have chosen. Most people would never have survived my life, but now after all of the pain and trauma I have dealt with, I am pleased with whom I've become as a result. People like my sister choose to make pain and difficulty their life story, and feed off the sympathy of others. Being this way has brought her down, and in my opinion, she isn't fit to live amongst society. Everything I've been through has made me stronger – God only knows I wasn't born this way. My parents certainly never raised me to be strong, but rather to depend on them for every emotional burden that rested upon me. If it were up to them, I would still be asking for their help with every obstacle. It's funny how parents often cannot see how things really should be for their children.

My long journey through life began in a suburb just outside of Cleveland. I actually was born in Russia, and was moved around for quite a few years in the US until my father decided to settle down in Akron, Ohio. Unfortunately, shortly after my father had come to America with my mother after his long run in the US Air Force, he and his family stopped speaking to each other for reasons unknown to Dominique or myself. His family lived in one of those wealthy communities in Connecticut, in the same house my father had been born and grew up in. I had yet to meet my father's two brothers, and his parents had died in a car accident when my sister Dominique and I were younger. When Dominique was born in Sacramento, CA, my father and mother wanted a permanent home. My father was in the Air Force when he and my mother met.

My sister Dominique was born eleven months after I was, so we were always extremely close – in age only. Since we were raised together so closely and practically the same year in school, Dominique constantly was in direct competition with me for grades, friends, boys and most especially, our parents love and attention. I always got better grades than she did – she eventually stopped trying. So instead of competing with me academically, Dominique became the promiscuous one of the two of us. I never could have given the boys what she was willing to give away so readily. She definitely had more friends than I did, but the kind of friends she had were not people I respected, and so I stayed away.

My father, Tristan Blackwater, played the role of my knight in shining armor when I was young. He was the one I would run to if I ever got hurt, and later on when I was older and still competing with Dominique for the boys' attention, I would sob on his shoulder until he convinced me that none of those boys would really matter to me in the future. He was right about that. All of the boys I found myself to be concerned about back then ended up going right to Dominique when I didn't give them what they wanted. I needed my father to tell me that didn't matter. I craved my father's attention and affection, especially since my mother was not good at revealing how she truly felt about people. In contrast, my father was an open book. When he would come into my room to tell me goodnight, he would kiss me and say, "You are my special girl, Katerina. Don't ever forget that no one could ever take your place in my life." I believed that I was truly his princess, and he would protect me forever.

My father was a handsome man, and younger than most of my friends' fathers. His hair was a dark brown color, with soft red highlights that Dominique had inherited. The pictures of him with my mother when they first met showed him to have short-cropped hair and striking blue-green eyes. The color of his eyes always depended on the season and the color of his shirt. When he wore darker colors, they were a light gray with green flecks. If he wore bright colors, as he often did, they were a bluish-green hue – practically purple. I would gaze into my father's eyes for long periods of time, and usually not notice I was doing it until Dominique would make some harsh comment like, "What's your problem, Kat? Stop staring at Dad!" My response was usually to blush and then give her some defensive retort. I was always worried about those comments she made. Sometimes I really did feel that no man would ever measure up to my father's ideal. When I would fantasize about the man I would marry, when he looked into my eyes, they were my father's, which scared me half to death.

When my father met my mother in the Air Force, she told me that his eyes were what drew her to him as well. Now my father made his living as a commercial airline pilot, and he was

out of town every other week. I never felt as safe those times then I did when my whole family was together under the same roof.

Growing up Moscow, my mother Alexandra Prokofievna had a hard time adjusting to suburban life in America. She spoke English fluently and her grammar was practically perfect. Our mother had studied French, English and Latin when she was a girl growing up in Russia. She always had a slight accent, which my friends all loved, but was second nature to me. My father always told me that my mother had a hard life, even though her family was extremely wealthy and affluent in Russia. When I would ask her why her life was so hard, so would turn her head and ignore my question, though I knew she was thinking about it because there were always tears in her eyes when I asked. I eventually just learned never to pry. The question continued to eat away at me but there was no one I could ask who would give me a straight answer. I asked my father once, but he told me that her life was for her to reveal to me, not him. I think he just wanted to avoid conflict with my mother because if he told Dominique and me, she would never forgive him for revealing any aspect of her character. My mother liked being in control of her own life, which made me wonder why she ever married my father in the first place, who moved her around to places she didn't want to be and wouldn't let her work because he was supposed to be the breadwinner. Any job my mother would have had would have been an assault on his manhood.

My mother had always been extremely beautiful in an almost surreal sense. She had long, almost black hair that I had inherited from her, and beautiful large black eyes. Her face was soft and round, with a smooth white complexion. I had inherited my mother's hair and skin tone, and Dominique had definitely inherited her figure. The two of them had miniscule waists and small, narrow hips. Dominique's favorite feature had to be the ample breasts she had inherited from my mother, which I often would catch her admiring every night before she went to bed. Dominique was convinced her breasts would make her famous one day, although they never did anything for my mother other than assist her in nursing two children. She rubbed lotion on them every night compulsively.

My mother was always proud of Dominique, and sometimes I feared my mother had much more love in her heart for Dominique than myself. I know most siblings have a rivalry, but in our case, my mother was sometimes the cause of it. My father was always somewhat equally affectionate with both Dominique and me, although I had never heard him call Dominique his "special girl". My mother thought that Dominique was a golden child who could do no wrong, and I truly believed she would go out of her way to ignore Dominique's debaucheries that were obviously affecting her life. One time I broke a plate and my mother smacked me for it, and Dominique was clumsier than I was, so it happened to her often and she was never punished the same way. I often told my father about what I thought about my mother's unfair behavior, but he would simply shrug it off and say, "Sometimes parents are harder on the oldest child. It's not unusual, my older brother Tom was always punished harder for anything that he did than Trevor and I were."

"But Daddy," I said, "Why does she hit me when what I did was an accident?"

"Well," he began, "Let's just say your mother has a lot of anger."

He wasn't kidding. My mother got angry for the slightest reasons; she got angry with my father because he didn't make enough money or he spent too much time away from home, she got mad at her family every time she got depressed and longed for her home in Moscow. Most often, she would get angry with me for the slightest reason she could think of, and that usually meant that I would have to spend time up in my room bedridden, because she would hit me with a birch switch, a method that she had inherited from her father's practices. I often wondered why my mother would treat me in such a harsh way that her father treated her, when she had a deep bitter hatred for the man. Wouldn't she want to avoid repeating his mistakes when she was so hurt by his actions? That was how she treated Dominique – every mistake she committed with me was elaborately avoided in Dominique's case.

Dominique took after my father in terms of looks. She inherited his reddish brown hair and striking blue eyes. Her skin was darker like his than my mother's, but it was a combination of the two. I was pale complexioned like my mother, almost more so, which never made sense to me because my father was so dark. My mother and I would have to cover ourselves in sunscreen of the highest protection factor while my Dominique and my father would tan in ten

minutes. In fact, there was nothing I had inherited from my father physically; I was almost a carbon copy of my mother, except for the eyes. I had eyes that no one else in my family had – pools of gold, so transparent you could barely tell where my irises ended and my pupils began. Dominique and I often wondered how we could be related when we looked so different. My father explained it to me once like this, “You and Dom just got features from opposite ends of the gene pool, it happens to lots of siblings.”

I had never seen two siblings look as different as Dom and I did. I didn’t doubt we were related – we shared lots of traits. Dom and I would both sneeze the minute we walked outside into sunlight. We also had similar voices. That was where the similarities ended entirely. Dominique and I disagreed on everything; sometimes I felt she would do it just for the sake of having a different opinion from mine.

My parents named me Katerina after my maternal grandmother, who died shortly after giving birth to my mother. According to my mother, healthcare was terrible in Russia back then, and she wasn’t convinced it was any better now. My father always commented on how much my name – or at least my nickname, Kat – suited me perfectly. He used to tell me that I would walk like a cat, pounce like a cat, and I would sneak up on him like a cat. My eyes reminded my mother of a cat when I was born, because they were practically all one color. I loved cats, but was never allowed to have one because my mother was afraid of all creatures that weren’t human. Dominique hated cats anyways, and probably would’ve tortured any cat we had.

I was extremely happy in those early years of my life, growing up oblivious to any problems that may have existed below the surface with our family. Despite my mother’s cruelty, she and I had our moments, although they were few and far between. I still loved her, and she could be kind to me when nothing was bothering her. I knew that my mother and father had secrets that they kept from Dominique and me, but I wasn’t about to unearth any of that in those days, as my naïve existence may have been plagued by the harsh reality that was about to step into my life for the first time.

## DAWN OF A NEW ERA

I woke up on my fifteenth birthday with a nervous feeling in my gut. I should have felt elated, but for reasons unknown to me I was dreading getting out of bed. I lay awake, pondering what the year would bring me. Fifteen was special, my mother had always told me. This year, I would truly begin to start feeling like a woman instead of a girl, according to her. I definitely didn’t feel like a woman yet, but I no longer felt like a girl.

I got up and jumped up in the shower. It was a warm June day, so I was lightly covered in perspiration when I woke up. Our air conditioning was never turned on until the hottest day, because my father liked to save money – another thing that angered my mother about him. I stepped out of the shower and began toweling off my hair that had grown down to my waist over the past three years. I stood naked in front of the mirror and looked at myself, now that I was all of fifteen, I thought I’d be different. To me, I was the same. I was still skinny, except for my hips, which were wider than my sister’s or mother’s. I was happy with my breasts, though. I wasn’t top heavy like my mother or Dominique, but I wasn’t flat either. My friend Allison from school had told me she envied my figure, as she was slightly on the chubby side. All of my baby fat had been discarded about a year ago, and since then I received almost as much attention from boys as Dominique did, but I wasn’t as obliging.

I put on my bathrobe and knocked softly on the door that led to Dominique’s bedroom. I heard no response, which meant she was still sleeping, so I walked into her room. Dominique’s room was the opposite of mine entirely. Instead of the soft lavender walls that enclosed me in my haven, she preferred a deep red. When we were younger, about four years ago, we had gone to the hardware store with my father and were allowed to choose the color for the walls in our bedrooms. My mother had rolled her eyes when Dominique chose the deep red. “It will look like a harlot’s room,” my mother joked. Dominique was the only fourteen year old I knew with black satin sheets, that she had spent about two months allowance on. Alternatively, I still had the canopy bed my father bought for me when I was ten years old, with white lace curtains and a bedspread to match. In her room there were clothes everywhere, makeup was spread out all over the counter of her dressing table and CDs had fallen from a haphazard stack and spilled out

onto the floor right in front of the bathroom door where I stepped out. I tripped over the pile and landed face down on the carpet.

Dominique moaned and pressed her pillow against her face to block out the light seeping through the window. I straightened myself up and went over to sit on her bed and shake her – something I knew she hated. I was intentionally provoking her on my birthday, because I wouldn't get in trouble for it on today of all days. She flipped herself over, mumbling, "Dammit, Kat, not now." I could smell the liquor she had consumed last night on her breath. I was astounded. How did she manage to sneak out and get drunk without anyone in this house hearing her come in?

"Let's go, Dom. I can practically smell your breath from across the room," I told her, "How on earth you get away with so much when you know how strict Daddy can be just amazes me."

She smiled for the first time, since being interrupted from her deep sleep, "I'm just smart, that's all. Daddy can't be everywhere at once."

I sighed. "Get out of bed, Dom, and go shower and brush your teeth. Otherwise Mom and Daddy are going to be able to tell you went out last night when you were supposed to be at home, sleeping."

She scowled, "Supposed to – Shmosed to. Why are you so uptight, Kat? I just went out driving for a few hours with Mike and some other guys."

"First of all," I began, "Mike was undoubtedly drinking while he was driving, since I've never seen him not be intoxicated. Also, he's only trying to take advantage of you, by getting you drunk when you're out past curfew and therefore he knows you're not going to try to alert the police the minute he tries anything funny."

Dominique smiled slyly. "I wouldn't call the police if Mike Friedman propositioned me."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

She rolled her eyes and got up from her bed. Dominique was completely naked, and she usually slept that way. I could see she had scratch marks on her breasts. She caught me staring and laughed, "So what?" she said, "I get way more action than you do. Jealous?"

"Hardly," I replied, which was a half-truth, "It looks like you were struggling". Mike was absolutely gorgeous, but extremely rude because he was convinced he was God's gift to women. Probably all of the girls who flocked to him weren't helping his assessment of himself, Dominique now included. It seemed to me that the only thing boys were interested in was what girls had to offer, and when they found out I wouldn't give them what they desired, they would always drop me for Dominique.

"By the way, Mike and some of his friends are coming to your party tonight," Dominique said while putting on her robe. "I'm sure you won't mind."

I did mind, but I didn't want to say anything. I guess having a good-looking guy like Mike Friedman did justice to my reputation with my friends (not like I cared) but I knew he was going to cause trouble. Then again, Dominique always caused trouble for herself so I supposed a few more delinquents wouldn't make a difference.

While she was showering, I got dressed. I wanted to look nice on my birthday, and it was a warm day, so I chose a pink dress with red flowers. It had spaghetti straps and a fringe on the hem that just grazed my knees. I put some lipstick on and gazed at my reflection. I did feel more mature today, probably because of my mother's theory, but still I felt more attractive as I stared at the "woman" I had become overnight. I decided to leave my hair down, because my father liked it that way. I felt he would truly be impressed with my metamorphosis.

Dominique burst into my room from her shower, with her long wet hair dripping down her back, making little dark wet drops on the beige carpeting. She had a towel around her waist as a man would. "Where's my red halter top?" she demanded.

"I haven't seen it since you wore it on the last day of school," I said, slightly disgusted. If she was going to wear that, I thought, she was going to be an embarrassment to my parents and me.

"Well," she said, "I don't have anything to wear."

I rolled my eyes, "Dom, you are being ridiculous. The last time I checked you had a closet full of enough clothes to dress an army!"

She glared at me and stomped out into the hallway. "MOM!" I heard her scream. I sighed and closed the door. I didn't want to hear yelling today, I wanted today to be perfect.

Apparently that was asking too much.

## THE FESTIVITIES

Dominique's red halter top was now a cleaning rag, according to our mother, who had seen her wear it on the last day of school and decided to get rid of it. Dominique threw a small tantrum and eventually found a skirt and top that revealed enough of what she believed was necessary to display to my friends.

When she and I got downstairs, my mother had prepared a huge breakfast fit for a queen. She still loved all of the food that she grew up eating in Russia, and my father, Dominique and I all grew to love it too. She had made blini, with blueberries and cream, which was my favorite. There were all types of smoked fish, like salmon and sturgeon and herring.

"All of this for breakfast?" my father asked, incredulously, "You didn't have to do all of this, Lexy. We could've been content with just cereal." He looked in my direction and smiled softly. "Just look at my princess," he said, "All grown up and a complete knockout."

I smiled and thanked him. "Good morning mother," I said, receiving a short grunt from her.

My mother poured my father a cup of coffee. Lexy was my father's pet name for my mother, whose full name was Alexandra. "You tell me it is a special day, so I prepare lots of food. Do you want me to throw it all away?" She glared at him. "Besides," she said to my father, "You just want to save money."

After much protesting from my father, Dominique and me, she served us the breakfast she was so intent on throwing out a moment ago. We all ate and talked. One of my favorite times of the day was breakfast, where the family would just talk about what was on our mind, what our plans were, and all sorts of other things. Today, my father talked about my party tonight. "Why won't you tell me what my present is, daddy?" I asked.

"Because it's a surprise," he said, and winked in my direction.

"Tristan," my mother said, "Just tell her."

"Nope, this one's not getting out this year." Every year my father would eventually give in and reveal that evening's surprise. One year it had been a beautiful music box, another year I was allowed to get my ears pierced. Last year my father took me on a vacation in Florida. I couldn't wait for my present this year.

The rest of the morning was spent preparing for the guests that would arrive in the late afternoon. We had a small blue Victorian "painted lady" that was trimmed in white. My father helped us hang the lanterns in front and we put torches up in the backyard. At night it would be spectacular, but mid-afternoon everything looked tacky. Every year, in May and June, for Dominique's and my birthdays we would go through this whole ordeal. Dominique used to complain that we should just leave them up from her birthday to mine, considering that there was less than a month between them, and it took about an hour to get them up and another hour to get them down. Our mother was always horrified at that suggestion, because the house looked so gaudy during the day with the bright colored lanterns strung up in our front yard. One of my mother's pet peeves was Christmas lights, and so lanterns wouldn't have been any less horrifying for her. Our mother cooked all week long in anticipation of our birthdays, and sometimes I wondered if she didn't hate the two months, as they were so hectic for her. I tried to help her, sometimes, although Dominique never did. I learned to cook a lot of things from my mother by watching, but nothing my friends ever considered "normal" food. When I went over to Allison's house for dinner sometimes, her mother would be astounded that my mother never served what most families considered "staple" food, such as green beans and mashed potatoes.

We set out the food an hour before the guests arrived and Dominique and I chose the music we would have playing for the night. When the guests began to arrive, Dominique and I greeted them at the door.

Allison arrived first, of course, and Hannah Adams came with her. "We're so excited!" Allison whispered to me, "We heard from Lesley Lawrence that Mike Friedman will be here!" I rolled my eyes because I knew Allison had a huge crush on Mike. She probably wouldn't be too thrilled to hear what Dominique had been up to the previous evening. Hannah followed Allison closely and smiled when she saw me.

"Hi Hannah," I said. "Thanks for coming."

"Thank you so much for inviting me!" she said, and handed me a large box wrapped in blue paper, "This is from me and my parents. They think you're the nicest girl, ever since you came over for dinner that one time last year."

"Really?" I said, "How can they remember? It was last year!"

"I dunno, they just really liked you!"

My friends began to pour through the door, and the presents were stacked up on the table in the foyer. Soon our house was filled with my friends, Dominique's friends and friends of the family. I was relieved that Mike Friedman had not yet shown up with any of his friends. Perhaps they had found better things to do.

I spent the next few hours gossiping with my friends from school, talking about what we were all doing that summer, what boys would be gone and who would still be around, what the next school year would be like. When I was midway through explaining my school schedule for next year, I saw Lesley Lawrence's eyes bulge out of her head, "There he is!" she exclaimed and pointed. When we all saw who she was pointing to, our mouths all dropped. Mike Friedman had just walked in. Hannah grabbed Lesley's finger a second before Mike looked in our direction. Lesley giggled ecstatically.

Dominique had seen Mike also, and barely managed to tear herself away from some boy from her class in time to make a beeline for Mike. Mike seemed to be heading over to me, but then Dominique went up to him and diverted his attention. I saw him arguing with her for a moment, and then he walked up to me standing with Allison, Hannah and Lesley.

"Hi Kat," he said, "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks Mike. Glad you could come."

He grinned, "I'm just glad you're letting me stay. I promise not to be any trouble." Sure, I thought, smelling the liquor on his breath. I realized I would need to keep an extremely close eye on him and Dominique all evening. My birthday was pretty much ruined. I sighed and turned back to my friends, who were staring at me like I had just grown antennae.

"How could you practically ignore him like that?" Lesley asked me.

"He's a jerk," I said, "He's just an attractive jerk. He'll ruin my party for sure."

"Don't say that!" Allison chimed in, "Give him a chance!"

"Allison," I said, "He's already drunk. Just wait an hour, you'll see."

I didn't even have to wait that long. Ten minutes later, after Dominique had displayed Mike to her friends, they were headed out the back door into the garden. I wasn't surprised neither one of my parents noticed Mike had been drinking, they were already pretty well intoxicated. My mother abused alcohol regularly, and my Daddy always drank on special occasions, and never handled it very well.

"I'm going to follow them," I whispered to Allison and Hannah. Lesley had wandered off to go talk to some other boys from our class, who were available now that Dominique had abandoned them.

"Don't Kat," Allison said, "You're just going to get angry on your birthday."

I ignored her and made my way out the back door. I saw Dominique and Mike walk into the tool shed. Great, I thought. No mystery there.

I snuck behind the shed and crouched down, listening to what was going on through a crack in the woodwork. Allison snuck up behind me shortly after I got there and crouched down next to me. "Where's Hannah?" I mouthed to her.

She pointed her thumb back at the house and shrugged. I saw Hannah standing by herself in the living room. I felt bad, Hannah wasn't capable of instigating conversation with anyone besides Allison and me without one of us being there. However, if she didn't want to spy with us, I wasn't objecting. I had better things to worry about than her.

"Take this," I heard Mike say. Take what? I wondered what he was talking about until I smelled marijuana smoke. Allison's mouth dropped. I wondered if she had ever smelled pot before. Obviously, she knew what it was.

Dominique began coughing and then laughing. Suddenly, she was laughing loudly, and Mike began shushing her.

"Sorry," she said, "It must be this stuff." I had found a hole in the woodwork and could see inside. Dominique had candles set up in the shed so it was very easy to see the two of them. She must come here regularly, I thought, to have candles already set up in there. I could see

Mike pulling off her top with one hand while the other hand was creeping up her thigh under her skirt.

"What's happening?" Allison whispered in my ear. I pushed her away, even though I was supposedly disgusted at what was happening in there, I was anxious to see what would happen next.

"Just go inside," I said. Allison looked genuinely hurt, but I really didn't care. I kept staring through that peephole. Eventually, Allison stopped standing over me and went back inside. The back door slammed behind her and I saw Dominique jump from the noise.

"Someone must be out here!" she whispered frantically to Mike. He shushed her again and stuck his head outside the door of the shed.

"Nope," he said. "Must be someone going into the house." He began kissing her neck and her now exposed breasts. Dominique moaned and rubbed her hand against his bulging crotch. He undid his belt for her and lowered his pants. When he stood up, he pulled her up with him and turned her around. His hands lifted her skirt up around her waist and he yanked her panties down.

She turned around, "No, Mike. Not like that."

His eyes were closed and he forced her to turn back around so she was facing away from him, "Mike, stop it!" she whispered frantically. Just then, he forced himself inside her and was breathing heavily against her neck with his hand on her mouth. Dominique was crying, I could tell. Her shoulders were shaking as they always did when she was trying not to show she was upset.

Without thinking twice, I ran back into the house to my father, who was lounging against his favorite chair in our living room listening to one of his fellow pilots tell a story about a man who had a nervous breakdown on one of his flights. My father was laughing jovially along with the group, and I hated dragging him away at that moment.

"Daddy," I asked nervously, "Can you please come help me with something?"

He looked up at me from his chair, "Can't your mother help you?"

"No, Daddy, only you."

He got up hesitantly and excused himself from his guests, and followed me out to the backyard. I saw Lesley whisper something to Allison and they saw me drag my father out the back door.

"What on earth did you want to show me out here?" he asked, quite loudly. I shushed him because I knew Mike and Dominique might be able to hear and led him over to the tool shed. All he needed to hear was Dominique's muffled whimper and he knew something was wrong. He flung the door open so hard it came off one of the hinges. Dominique was beneath Mike on the dirt floor, her face was wet with her tears and her clothes were torn off and thrown to the side. My father's anger was reflected in his eyes, although he let his face remain completely stoic. He reached down and with one arm, pulled Mike off of Dominique and threw him to the side. Mike's pants were around his ankles and everyone who got a spot by the back window in the house was presented with a full viewing of what was happening.

Before my father could grab Mike and beat the living daylights out of him, Mike dashed across the yard and over the fence that separated our yard from the neighbor's. I rushed over to Dominique and pulled her close to me, rocking her back and forth as she bawled out all of her frustration from what had just happened. My father stood at the doorway to the shed, looking down at the two of us who seemed to find so much comfort from each other. He turned around and walked toward the house. "Party's over. Everyone please go home *now*."

I don't know how long it took everyone to leave and I don't remember how long Dominique and I stayed that way. Neither my father nor my mother came outside to help us, or comfort Dominique, they just let us stay out there. Finally, around ten o'clock or so, I asked Dominique if she was okay to go back into the house. Her head was in my lap and I was stroking her hair. She nodded and sat up, and immediately put her fingertips up to her temples. I was familiar with that pose from Dominique, which meant she was dizzy. I helped her to her feet and led her through the back door, which was left unlocked for us. We climbed up the stairs and I took her into the bathroom and sat her down on the toilet.

"Put your head between your knees, Dom." She did as I told her, while I ran a bath. I filled it with soothing bubbles and helped Dominique get undressed. She had scratch marks all

over her body, some of which had bled. I knew they would hurt once she hit the hot water, so I dabbed some peroxide on the wounds with a cotton ball.

When the tub was filled I helped her lower herself into the tub. She started screaming the minute her body touched the soapy water, and immediately leaped out of the tub. Our mother was standing at the door after she heard Dominique scream.

"Get in the bath, Dominique," she said with her arms crossed, staring at Dominique's scratched body up and down.

"Momma," she whined, "The water stings."

"Those scratches are going to sting until they heal."

"Not my scratches, Momma," She cried, and indicated between her legs.

Our mother leaned over and smacked Dominique so hard that she felt backwards into the tub, hitting her head on the tile. I had never seen my mother hit Dominique before, and I think it shocked all of us. Our mother left the bathroom and Dominique sat halfway in the tub crying. I sat on the toilet seat, watching Dominique take her bath, making sure she didn't pass out from a concussion or anything. When she had soaked long enough, I helped her out and helped her dry off and get into pajamas, which were a foreign concept to Dominique. When she got into bed, she practically passed out immediately. I went into my room and shut the door.

I was angry that my birthday had been ruined, despite how badly I felt about Dominique's incident. I felt bad for her, but why did I deserve to have her bad luck affect my happiness? She could be so impulsive, which was exactly what got her in trouble in the first place. And my day was ruined as a result. I started to cry until I heard a knock on my door.

"Come in," I said, wiping my face. My father opened the door and walked in. He shut the door behind him, which made me uncomfortable, because he had never been all the way in my room before, much less with the door closed. He sat down on my bed and stroked my hair.

"Now, now darling," he said, "I know how hard this evening was on you. Thank you for letting me know what was happening. If I ever get my hands on that jerk..."

"Daddy, shhhhhh." I didn't want to be reminded of what Mike had done to Dominique. As far as I was concerned, I never wanted to hear his name spoken again.

"I know, baby. I'm sorry to bring it up." He sat and stared at his hands for a minute.

"You probably forgot about this," he said, and handed me a small box wrapped in silver with a pink ribbon wrapped around it.

My father always knew exactly what would make me happy, and what would make my heart melt. After all that had happened with Dominique to attract my parents' attention, my father still remembered me. I sat up and wiped off my face, staring at the beautiful box in my hands. "Oh Daddy! It's too beautiful to open."

"Not as beautiful as my sweet girl," he said, and kissed me on the lips. "Happy Birthday, Katerina."

His kiss made me blush and for some reason, made me feel extremely nervous. My father had kissed me on the lips before, as fathers and daughters often do, but this time his lips lingered and I could taste the liquor on my mouth afterward.

I untied the ribbon, which fell to my lap, and I slowly undid the beautiful silver paper that encased the perfect cube. I took care not to tear the paper. As sentimental as I was I had all of the paper that my birthday presents had been wrapped in saved in one of the multiple scrapbooks that I kept. After I removed the paper I folded it and put it on my nightstand.

I felt guilty receiving my birthday present after all that had happened, but I'm sure my father was even more broken up about what had happened to Dominique than I was. I couldn't imagine what he felt walking into the tool shed and seeing his own daughter like that. I felt that opening my present would make my father happy about something today.

Underneath the paper a wooden square box was revealed to me. I turned it in my hands looking for an opening, but could find none. The box must have been able to open because there was a line around the perimeter indicating that there was more to the box that met the eye. I must have looked confused because my father lifted the box out of my arms and began to tell me the significance.

"My father gave this box to my mother on their first wedding anniversary, and she was just as confused as you are right now." He chuckled. "It has a very special way of opening. You have to put your hands on either side like this," he said, holding the box on his lap with his palms



flat on either side, "And apply equal pressure with both of your arms. See? It opens quite easily." The box did open after he showed me, and in the center of a blue velvet lining, was a small, priceless Faberge Egg. I only knew what it was because my father had a book downstairs about them, and I had actually seen a picture of the one I now held in my hand. I could barely breathe from the excitement of being given a present as grand as this one!

The egg I held was a light blue, with real gold edging and small white flowers. I was so taken aback by the beauty of it that my father's voice brought me back from the daze I had been in since he opened the box. "My mother was a very demanding woman," he said, "Not like you are, but always expecting to have the best of everything." He paused as the memories clouded his eyes, "My father was very wealthy, and so for their first wedding anniversary he was determined to find the most beautiful and most expensive gift he could for the occasion. He had yet to give my mother a gift that pleased her." His eyes rolled, "She was impossible! And when he presented her with this present, he had the box created to fool her into thinking that he had bought her something as plain and unimaginative as a wooden box.

"For a year she believed that my father had given her a plain wooden box for their anniversary. She put it on display in their living room so guests would ask her about it and she'd tell them that her husband, my father, was too cheap to get her anything of value for their anniversary. When their second anniversary arrived, her showed her how to open the box."

I laughed, "How funny! She really thought that it was a plain wooden box?"

"Yup. She could never figure out how to open it and he never showed her until their second wedding anniversary.

"When he revealed what was inside the box, my mother took back everything she had said about him that year, and then had the same box on display in the living room, only now the box was set open so everyone could see the beautiful and expensive gift my father had given to her.

"On their third anniversary, he opened the egg for her."

My eyes opened wide upon hearing this. Something else? Something more than the priceless Faberge Egg? What on earth could it be?

My father saw my curious look. "Go on," he said, "I know you're eager to know what's inside."

I picked up the egg gently. It weighed less than I thought, with all of that elaborate gold on it, I would have thought it to be heavier. I saw the gold clasp, and lifted the top half of the egg up to reveal a sapphire ring that matched my father's eyes perfectly.

"This, my darling," he said, "Is yours. I can't think of anyone more deserving of a gift as priceless and beautiful as this one." He had tears in his eyes as he said this, making me wonder what sentimental memory he was thinking about.

"My mother was so proud of that ring," he said, "It's a nine carat sapphire on platinum. My father found the perfect sapphire to match her eyes."

"They match yours, Daddy. You must look how your mother did."

"Yes," he said, getting wistful. "My mother and I were alike in many ways."

This surprised me since I had never heard anything good ever said about my grandmother, and my father was such a good man, "How so Daddy?"

"Well," he said, "we looked alike, and my temper is from her." He did have a violent temper, but he never took it out on me. Only my mother ever seemed to be mad at me.

"Anyways," he said, "I hope you like your present. I think you're so special, Katerina, and I want you to remember that every time you hold this egg, or wear this ring."

"Daddy, I can't wear this ring! I'm afraid I'd lose it."

"Not everyday," he said, "But on special occasions you should wear it." He turned and looked at me so closely, I felt self-conscious. "You may not understand things today, Katerina, but in time you'll grow to know why I feel the way I do about you."

Feel about me? What was he talking about? I figured it was the alcohol talking and he had lost control of his senses. He obviously knew who I was, but he wasn't making any sense. "Daddy, what are you – " Before I could finish what I was saying, he kissed me on the lips, hard and passionately, as though I was his wife. I gasped for breath when he stopped and began to kiss my neck and my shoulders. He pulled my nightgown up over my hips and reached inside to

put his hands on my breasts. I stared down at the man I knew as my father, unable to move, holding my breath.

"I won't hurt you Katerina," he said, staring up into my eyes, "I love you." He gently pushed me back against my pillows so I was lying on the bed, and his hands roamed over me. He stroked and kissed my breasts, burying his face into them. His lips wrapped around the nipple and when he sucked gently, I gasped and felt a warm wetness between my legs. I could feel his hardness pressing against me, which made me press myself against him. I didn't want to do this – this was my father, whom I'd always trusted and looked up to, and yet I wasn't able to stop myself. I couldn't hold back anymore, and began to move my hips to receive his thrusts. His hands finally found the ridge of my panties, which he shoved down to my knees and then he entered me.

Now I was completely naked, and I could see my father hovered over me, pushing his manhood forth inside me. My legs wrapped instinctively around his waist, and I lifted my hips to meet his. "Katerina, my love," he cried, and released himself, tumbling over onto me, still inside me. I held him as he shook from the last quivers of his climax, and then I began to cry.

"Katerina, don't cry," he said, "No one will know this happened." I was crying because I didn't stop him, which anyone with any decency would have. I was also crying because I felt different, and I wanted him again. He rolled off me and lay down on my bed next to me, stroking my cheek as he spoke softly to me. "I love you so much, you'll never know how much...." After saying that he drifted off to sleep.

I lay awake in bed most of the night and into the morning, with my father asleep next to me. I was so scared that my mother would know what happened. She hated me enough without knowing that I made love to her husband – my father! I couldn't get over the idea that I had just given myself for the first time to my father, of all people. As a result, I had ruined both of our lives, not to mention my mother's if she ever found out.

Why did my father give me that precious gift before he decided to show me how he felt about me? Why couldn't he have given that gift to Dominique – what would have happened then?! I couldn't sleep from all of the terrible thoughts that crossed my mind, but eventually I drifted off. When I awoke, my father was gone. I looked at the wooden box that was sitting intact on my nightstand. My father must have put everything back in its place before he left, I thought, except me.

I left the box on my bedside table and threw on some jeans and a t-shirt. My nightgown lay torn on the floor, which I picked up and stashed in a drawer. I didn't want to chance my mother seeing that my nightgown was torn when she did laundry, and have to answer any questions. My mother always knew when something was wrong, which is why I feared going downstairs that day.

Everything seemed normal downstairs. Dominique was eating breakfast and reading her horoscope as she always did, acting as though nothing had happened to her last night. Our mother was washing dishes, and didn't pay any attention to me when I sat down at the table and helped myself to a blintz. Good, I thought. My father was nowhere to be found. It was alarmingly quiet at the table while I was eating. All that could be heard was the running water and Dominique turning the pages of the newspaper. When I was finished with my breakfast, no one had said anything yet so I tentatively broke the silence. "Where's Daddy?" I asked. The moment the words left my mouth our mother dropped a glass, which shattered the minute it hit the kitchen tile. Dominique jumped and I sat very still, waiting for an answer.

"Dammit!" my mother cried, and she swore in Russian so Dominique and I wouldn't understand the string of profanities that left her mouth. She grabbed the broom and started sweeping up the glass.

Dominique looked at me and said, "He's at work, remember?"

Of course, I had forgotten that my father had mentioned to me he would have to leave for work early the morning after my birthday. He had a flight to California today and would be gone for the next two days. I felt relieved, knowing that everything was as it should be. Our mother, however, didn't seem to be her normal self. "Mom?" I said, "Is everything all right?"

She turned and glared at me through her black eyes. "Get out of my sight. I don't want to see you today." I ran from the kitchen upstairs to my bedroom and shut the door. She knows, I thought. What'll I do now? I threw myself face down on my bed and started to really bawl, the

way I used to when I was a little girl and I would go running to Daddy who would kiss my tears and make everything okay. I was so far from being that little girl again, I thought. When would I ever feel the same?

I hear a knock on my door. "Come in," I said, not getting up from my position on the bed. I heard Dominique enter and close the door. She came up to me and stroked my hair, which made me cry even more. She looked alarmed.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" she asked.

"No!" I cried, afraid that she would. I needed to be with someone right now, even if it was the most insensitive person I could think of, "Stay here with me, Dom, please."

"Alright," she said, and lay down next to me on my bed. I turned over and looked at her. In spite of all the trouble she got into, Dominique could be really supportive. "Why is Mom so mad at you?" she asked.

I pretended not to know. "She's probably just mad because I made her break a glass. You know how she is."

Dominique looked skeptical, "Just for breaking a glass? Come on Kat, you know something."

"Maybe I do," I said. "Are you okay now?" Changing the subject seemed an effective way to have Dominique still talk to me without questioning me about what had happened.

"Yeah," she said, "But I'm mad as hell from what that jerk did to me. I'm just glad Daddy came when he did. Thanks for getting him to go out there. I know it wasn't easy."

"No, it wasn't," I said, "But I'm glad I got him out there."

"So tell me Kat," Dominique broke in, "How come Momma is so mad at you today?"

"Isn't she always?" I asked, avoiding the subject.

"No," she said, "I've seen her not angry with you before. I also never saw her that angry before either for no good reason."

"What about last night when she hit you?"

Dominique pondered that. "No," she said, "Because that was expected. I wasn't surprised when she hit me then. But this morning, she seemed in one of those indifferent moods and all of the sudden, you come downstairs and she's throwing dishes."

For the first time all morning, I laughed, "Well, I guess I just cause people to do things like that." I stopped laughing and got serious, "Really, Dominique, I don't know why and I don't want to think about it. Let's do something to take our minds off our troubles. Do you want to go riding today?"

Dominique's eyes lit up and reminded me of Daddy. I must have looked pale, because she looked inquisitive again but didn't say anything.

Dominique and I had been horseback riding since we were children, and even had our own horses (another present from my father that made my insides stir at that moment). I had a beautiful Appaloosa named Star, and Dominique's horse was a white Arabian named Sliver. We went over to Harm's Woods every weekend all year round to ride them, weather permitting. Since school had ended, we had yet to really go and so the thought of going back to our old routine during the year was comforting.

She and I got our riding gear on, grabbed our hard hats and walked to the bus stop. Mom acted like she didn't notice us leaving and I saw her get the bottle of Stoli out so I knew she wouldn't really notice we were gone.

When we got to the stables, Dominique and I saddled up our horses and took off on the trail. I knew the footing by heart, as did Star, so I blanked out my mind and just rode. Dominique was up ahead of me about forty yards, the sun beamed down onto our backs and the tall trees cast shadows on the path. As much as I tried to think about nothing, my mind always wandered back to Daddy. I could still feel his hands on me, as though he were sitting on the horse behind me, protecting me. I sighed and trudged on, getting bored with the monotony of the trail.

"Hey Dom," I called, "Let's canter for awhile." She turned around and nodded and gave Sliver a good kick. He shot forward so quickly I almost lost sight of them before I gave Star a kick and sent her off after them.

Now with the wind streaming through my hair and the trees rolling by as I rode I could really take my mind off everything. I closed my eyes and held onto Star's mane and felt the wind take me away.....far, far away.....

## MOMENTS OF TRUTH

I woke up in a hospital bed, with a bandage wrapped around my forehead. The harsh lights hurt my eyes, and I put my hands up to cover them. I felt my hands being snatched away from my face, and when my eyes found their focus, I was staring into my mother's black eyes that were filled with rage. "What do you think you are doing?" she spat, "You are so stupid sometimes, I do not know why I bother telling you what is right and wrong – you will never know!"

"Mom?" I asked, "What happened to me?"

"You fell off your horse, that's what happened, you foolish girl." She sounded drunk and smelled of alcohol and cigarettes. Her eyes were ringed with red, as though she had been crying all day. I shied away from her face as she pushed it towards mine.

"I – I'm sorry Mom. I don't remember it. I remember riding –"

"Shut up!" she shouted at me. A nurse jumped in the open doorway, shook her head and walked away. My mother walked over there and slammed the door shut and preceded to yell at me. "You probably want to know why I'm so angry," she said, more calmly than she had been yet to me. When I didn't respond, she continued. "Yes, you'll probably ignore me, because you know what you did wrong. I don't need to tell you how wrong it was, I'm sure if you don't already know, you're about to find out." I wanted to disappear under those white sheets, but all I could do is listen. I tried to close my eyes because the light was hurting my head, but she smacked me. "You will watch and listen to every word I say!" she shrieked, "This is important!"

"Yes mother," I said.

She smirked at me and leaned against the door. "Your father has told me what you did last night."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Listen you slut!" she bellowed, "I am talking and you are listening. Understand?"

"Yes mother," I said.

"Now," she began, "Your father left me a note before he left for work this morning. I'm sure you are curious to know what this note says?"

"Yes mother," I said, although I would have sold my soul not to hear what was in that letter from my father.

"Dear Alexandra (she read):

I know you'll find me a coward when you find out what I am going to do, but I've come to accept the fact that I am a coward, and I can no longer be strong when I give into temptation as I have.

Last night I made love to your daughter, Katerina, and I cannot forgive myself. Despite the fact that I am not her biological father, I can't help feeling I've let her down in some way. How can she trust any man after what I've done?

I've decided I have to leave. I'm not going any place so don't try looking for me. I know I've been by your side for so many years but I can't bear to be with a woman like you anymore. You've turned me against you and into your daughter's bed.

I will regret leaving Dominique, of course, but she will eventually learn that she is better off not knowing what kind of man her father really is.

Please tell Katerina and Dominique that I loved them.

Tristan"

She looked at me after finishing the letter to see my reaction. A thousand thoughts were forming in my head at that moment. The man who I thought was my father for fifteen years was really a stranger! I didn't make love to my father last night, I made love to some man I never knew. What did he mean by "I'm not going any place"? Why was "loved" past tense? Didn't he still love us? In spite of everything I had learned just now, I refused to swallow it. "I want to see Daddy."

My mother's eyes enlarged in her head, "What on earth are you talking about? Are you stupid? Did you hit your head too hard? He was never your father!" She repeated herself for emphasis, "That man was not your father! That man was my husband!"

Then I understood. Every hostile feeling my mother ever had toward me was revealed in that moment of truth. My mother was jealous of me! Her husband turned to me, her daughter,

when his wife no longer satisfied him. The knowledge gave me such a feeling of power, to know that if my mother was going to hate me all my life, I had this leverage on her. Now I wouldn't have to live with my mother anymore – that woman would never hurt me again! I was going to find my father and live happily ever after. I loved him so much then, I knew it would all work out perfectly, and I'd finally be happy and taken care of for the rest of my life!

"I'm sorry if your husband left you, Momma, but at least he got away from you," I was astounded at the words leaving my mouth. I never had the nerves to say anything like that. She practically turned beet red in front of me.

"You stupid slut!" she screamed, "The man you thought was your father, the man you seemed to love so much...he's dead!"

I felt as though I'd been punched in the stomach. Oh, my world was crashing down around me, and I could do nothing about it. My knight in shining armor – dead? That couldn't be, I had just seen him last night. She was lying to me again, I could tell. Her nostrils flared as she glared at me. In her hand, she held the letter from my father. "How? How is he dead? He had to go to work today. Didn't you tell me he was at work?"

"He went to work," she said, "On time and he flew all the way to California. After he landed and everyone was off the plane, he took a gun and shot himself," she pointed to her temple, "Right here. He was dead instantly."

"You say that like you don't even care!" I cried, "You're lying to me!"

"No! I am not lying to you!" she shouted, "And excuse me for being bitter but I have never loved that man. I married him to leave Russia, that's it. Once he served his purpose I was stuck with him"

I sobbed. "How can you say that? He did everything for you. How can you be so ungrateful? You share a child!"

She grimaced, "I appreciated what he did for me, but I never loved him. I think he already knew that." She picked up her purse, indicating that she was leaving. "You should rest. I think you'll have a lot to think about this summer."

I squeezed my eyes closed as she walked out the door. Tears freed themselves and streaked down my face and onto my neck. I turned to my side and hugged my knees to my chest. I knew God was punishing me for my sins. Would my life ever be normal?

The funeral was the following Saturday, on a warm rainy day in June. There weren't very many people attending, because we never had any contact with my mother's or father's family. A bunch of Daddy's associates from work came though, mostly pilots. Since my father was in the Air Force, there were servicemen present, and they presented our mother with the American flag.

She played her role perfectly, pretending she was crying, mourning, and weeping all at the same time. Her act made me sick, considering I had seen her go out every night since Daddy had been gone, and sometimes not come home until the next afternoon. Dominique slept most of the day, so she never noticed when Mom came in, for which I was grateful. I didn't think Dominique was strong enough to handle knowing how little our mother cared for her father.

I was a mess, of course, but Dominique just assumed it was because I had just lost a father. She had completely forgotten what happened with Mike Friedman on my birthday when the news of our father's death was broken to her. I had never seen her so depressed before. It had always seemed that nothing could burst Dominique's cheerful attitude, until she heard about Daddy.

That was another thing eating away at me. I had been calling this man "Daddy" or "my father" for years, and now what? I couldn't just call him "Tristan" out of the blue. The concept was foreign to me. As long as Dominique didn't know that I was really her half sister, I would have to continue referring to "that man" as Daddy. After all, I had never known any other man as my father, so I could really only call the one man who had truly been a father to me.

But had he really? He made love to me on my fifteenth birthday, which didn't seem at all father-like to me. I had read articles in women's magazine about how other women were molested by their fathers and had to spend years in therapy trying to make their selves forget. In my case, I didn't object, I didn't prevent it from happening, and I wanted it to happen. What was wrong with me? At the time, I thought he was my father, and yet I willingly let him have me. Now that I knew the truth, I longed for the man we were about to put in the ground. I had just fallen in love with him, and now he was dead.

Daddy, why did you leave me to deal with all of this pain?

And who was my real father? My mother didn't seem to want to share that with me, and I wasn't about to instigate that discussion. The only hope I had that was distracting me from the events taking place was that somewhere, out there, the truth did exist. I was determined to uncover it.

Dominique and I stood together the whole service, and I stared at my friends who had attended the funeral. How could I be the same age? They were all so naïve, and so innocent. I couldn't tell them what had happened to me, they just assumed my tears were from losing a father. I felt like I couldn't speak to them, and dreaded the moment they would address me.

When the service was over, everyone drove back to our house to eat. For the first time since I could remember, our mother had not bothered to cook anything, so Dominique and I pitched in to buy some trays from the deli, which were finished by the time everyone had arrived at the house. Dominique and I cleaned the house the day before as well, since our mother wasn't around the entire week before the funeral. If I had been unconcerned with any of the other events happening in my life, I might have cared what others thought of us, but I didn't.

Allison, Hannah and Lesley all tried to comfort me and exchange their sympathies, but I wasn't in the mood to hear them. Dominique was talking to a few of her friends so I snuck upstairs to my bedroom, and fell asleep.

I woke up to someone shaking me, which turned out to be Dominique. "Wha – what?" I asked her, "What's wrong?"

"Momma's gone," she told me, looking depressed.

"So?" I said, "Mom doesn't seem to care that she has two children to take care of at all."

"It's two o'clock in the morning!" she exclaimed, "Where on earth would she be this late?"

I remembered Dominique didn't know about our mother staying out practically every night this week. "It's okay, Dom. She'll come home eventually."

How wrong I was! Mom did come home, but not until two days later. By that time, Dominique and I had practically eaten all of the food that our friends had brought over after the funeral. We were both sleeping when she came home, at 5:00 in the morning.

We woke up hearing voices, and not just our mother's. A deeper voice that belonged to some strange man carried up the stairs into my bedroom, where Dominique and I slept. We were afraid to sleep alone for those two days, because we had never been left on our own before. Dominique lay curled up against the wall, not yet roused from the loud voices downstairs. I slipped out of the bed and crept to the top of the staircase, where I could hear better.

"Where do you keep the Jack Daniels?" I heard the man ask. I pressed myself against the wall when I saw him walk by, past the stairs and into the living room. From the look of him, I wouldn't have been noticed anyways. His eyes were so bloodshot and puffy, they were practically swollen shut. He was unshaven, and his dark hair looked as though it hadn't seen a pair of scissors in months. He stumbled over to our liquor cabinet, which our parents had always kept well stocked, and poured himself a tumbler full of 12-year-old scotch, a far cry from Jack Daniels. Tears came to my eyes when I remembered Daddy getting that bottle of scotch from his friends at work for 15 years of service. Now it would be wasted on some imbecile.

The man stood at the liquor cabinet for some time, eyeing his reflection in the mirror. Then something appeared to catch his eye; me. I had been found out, hiding in my spot on the top of the stairs. He turned himself toward me, and I froze, not knowing if I should run back to the safety of my bedroom or if I should go downstairs and confront my mother about her choice of houseguests.

I must have thought I had nerves of steel that day, or maybe I was just desperate to see my mom, but regardless I walked toward that man standing there in our living room, drinking my Daddy's hard earned scotch. "Well, lookit that!" he exclaimed, "Alex! I didn't know you had a younger version of yourself caged up here! She almost looks just like you!"

I glared at the man and said, "I am nothing like my mother, *sir*, so don't expect to get anything out of me that she's been willing to give you."

He howled with laughter. "Well, aren't you full of fire? What's your name, little girl?"

I ignored him and turned to walk to the kitchen, where I could hear my mother crashing into counters and banging cabinet doors. I wasn't going to answer any scum of a man who showed up at our house at such an awful hour. My mother was smoking a cigarette and looking

more terrible than I had ever seen her look before. Her dark hair was a mess, and she had circles under her eyes that had lost most of the light they used to possess. I gasped when I saw her, and she only looked up at me and smirked, as though to indicate she knew how much her unusual appearance frightened me.

"I look terrible, no?" she said, taking a deep drag off the filter. I coughed as she blew the smoke in my direction. She rolled her eyes.

"You are such a....." she paused, struggling for the word, "A goody-goody. That's what I mean."

"There are worse things to be called, mother," I replied. The man came into the kitchen with a fresh, full glass of Daddy's scotch.

"Who is this stunning young version of you, Alex?" he asked my mother. She glared at him, probably for calling me stunning and young.

"She has no business being down here. Kat, go back upstairs! I don't want to see you anywhere near me!"

I stood quietly for a moment, trying to absorb what she was telling me. Why was she always like this with me? Didn't I deserve to be where I wanted? I lived here too! "NOW!" my mother shrieked at me, and I jumped and scurried back upstairs.

Dominique was awake, still lying in my bed, with tears streaming down her face. "Who is that man downstairs?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, "But he's a real jerk."

"I want to go downstairs!" Dominique exclaimed, "Maybe Momma brought us food."

I felt sad for her then. Dominique needed more attention than I did from our mother, and right now we were being treated equally, which was never the case when Daddy was alive. "Dom, I didn't see any food down there, and Mom said she wants us to leave her alone right now. I'll tell you what. Later when Mom and that man are gone, or asleep, we'll go out and buy some food." I had about twelve dollars stashed away in my drawer, which I felt needed to be spent on food at this time. Dominique and I had cereal for dinner last night, and now even that was all gone.

She looked hurt. "Why doesn't she ever want to be with us anymore? You would think that after losing one member of a family, you would want to be close to the other people in the family."

How profound for Dominique! I had never heard her say anymore more truthful or touching, and yet the saddest thing about that statement was that I knew how little of a "family" we ever were. All I could say to her was, "I know. Let's try to go back to sleep. Time will go by more quickly that way."

She sighed. "I'm not sleepy anymore, Kat. Just hungry."

"I know, I know. Trust me, you'll feel better if you sleep."

She rolled over and turned away from me. I lay back against my pillow and started weeping. How could she do this to us? Why was God always punishing me? I was a good person, but for some reason I was being punished for sins I didn't know I was capable of committing.

I heard the sounds of my mother and that man making love from my parent's bedroom, and I knew Dominique heard it too because a whimpering sound came from the back of her throat. So this is how it's going to be, I thought. Dominique and I are going to have to make it on our own if this continues.

Daddy! Please come back to me and make everything the way it was! Take me away from here, where we can go away and be husband and wife where no one knows us and no one will ever find us!

## ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Weeks went by more slowly than ever, as Dominique and I struggled to find food and money. Our mother would come by and leave us cash here and there, but never enough to last until the next time she dropped in. I felt guilty when my friends would invite me over to come to dinner, because I was so eager to accept their invitations. Then they would become suspicious when I would ask if Dominique could come too.

"I thought you two didn't get along," Allison told me on the phone one day, "Why are you so insistent that she come to dinner?"

Of course, I never told them the real reasons. I just danced around the point saying things like, "Dominique and I have become close this summer, that's all." My friends just assumed it was from my father's death.

Eventually, the phone got turned off because my mother never paid any of the bills. She had no job, and never had the entire fifteen years she had lived in America. She had no college degree and no real skills to speak of. She could have been a translator, but she never bothered to clean herself up long enough to go to a job interview. I grew more scared every week, and when the lights were turned off, I was at a loss.

"I don't know what we can do, Dom. It's fine being here during the day, but at night this old house is creepy."

Dominique seemed to be in worse shape than I was. Her usually tanned skin had become a sallow color, and she ate practically nothing. I almost had to force feed her. I assumed she was depressed, and quite frankly, who wouldn't be? She had lost a father and a mother in one summer, as had I. However, the difference was I had never had a father in the first place. I had yet to reveal to Dominique what our father had done to me before he killed himself, and I didn't know if I ever could. She had enough to worry about, especially with the summer coming to an end.

"How on earth are we going to buy books and school supplies?!" she cried, after our high school had sent us the sheet listing what supplies we would need to start next year.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe we should call Daddy's family in Connecticut."

Dominique's eyes lit up, "That's a good idea, Kat!"

I hesitated. "I honestly don't know if it's a good idea or not. We don't know why Daddy hasn't spoken to them since we were born and we don't know them at all. Besides, when and if we contact them, what are we going to say?"

"We could tell them that our mother doesn't care about us anymore and we need money so we can make it on our own," she said.

"Dominique! We can't tell them that! They're not just going to hand us over some money and say 'Bye'. We're going to have to think of something better than that."

"Come on, Kat. It's our only hope." She was right. We couldn't put any faith in our mother anymore and we had no one else to turn to. But I told her I had to sleep on it and we'd think about what our plan was tomorrow morning.

The next morning I woke up feeling ill, and barely crawled over Dominique in time to make it to the bathroom. I threw up several times, although I hadn't had anything to eat in two days, and stumbled back to the bed.

I lay awake afterwards and thought about when my last period was. Not since before my birthday! It had been two months since that day, and I paled at the thought...I was pregnant! Why didn't I know this before? I was apparently too distracted with my mother leaving home, taking care of Dominique and deciding what I would do next.

I got up and dressed and went downstairs to find something to drink that would rid me of the taste in my mouth. When I went into the kitchen, my mother was there! She was looking better than I had seen her in months, wearing a dark blue fitted suit with her hair done up. She looked as though she had just come from the beauty parlor. I gasped when I saw her, since I hadn't seen her in almost two weeks and when I had seen her last, she looked like she was on drugs. Today she looked like she used to be, and she almost fooled me into thinking she was.

"Momma!" I cried, "Where have you been? Are you going to stay?"



She looked at me incredulously, as though my head had just split open and spiders were seeping out of my skull. I was embarrassed from displaying my obvious need to have her in my life, even though I was already fifteen and she hadn't bothered to be around all summer.

"No, I'm not going to stay, and neither are you," she replied. "Where's Dominique? I have something to tell both of you."

"She's upstairs sleeping, Mom."

"Go and get her."

I ran up the stairs to my bedroom and shook Dominique awake. "Wha – what?" she mumbled, putting her arm up to her eyes to block out the light.

"Mom's home!" I said excitedly, "And she wants to talk to us downstairs!"

Dominique's eyes snapped open and she bolted from the bed, straight down the stairs into the kitchen, still half naked. "Momma!" she cried, throwing herself in our mother's arms. For some reason, it surprised me that our mother hugged her back, but apparently she had lost no love for Dominique, just me. After all, Dominique hadn't made love to her dead husband.

"I missed you, Momma," said Dominique, with tears in her eyes. I turned my head so neither one of them would see me cry. I didn't want our mother to know that I cared anymore.

"I missed you too, baby," she said, and hugged Dominique more tightly. She glared at me over Dominique's shoulder. For the first time, I glared right back at her. "I have something to tell you both," she said, and pointed to the kitchen table, "Sit down." Dominique and I both sat down at the table in our usual places. Mom sat where she always sat at dinner, which reminded me of the fact that my father would never sit and eat with us again. "I found a job," she began, "Which means that I have money coming in. Your father was a bastard who left his family with nothing to survive on. His life insurance policy is practically spent.

"I can't tell you what kind of job I will be doing. All I can tell you is that I have to send you both away, because I'm not going to be around much at all anymore."

My heart stopped in its tracks. Sending us away? How could she do this? I had lived in Akron since I could remember, Everything had changed in my life this summer and now she was going to make it even more difficult for Dominique and me.

"I've contacted the head Dean for Germantown Academy and he's decided to enroll the two of you for classes next year." She looked up at Dominique and me to see if we had any reaction. We were both silent and still. "You will leave on Sunday." That was two days from today!

Dominique looked at me, alarmed. "Momma!" she exclaimed, "I don't want to leave Akron! Are you going to live in this house all alone?"

"No," she said, "I'm not. I'm staying with some...associates from my new job. I will call you but I cannot have either one of you contacting me."

Oh how sneaky of her! Not only was she not going to tell us what she was doing but she was smart enough to take all precautions to not let us find out. I felt betrayed by her, even though she had never really given me any reason to trust her.

"Now if either one of you has any objections, I don't care," she said. "There's nothing you can say or do to change my mind about this. You're going."

"I have something that might change your mind, mother," I piped up, suddenly realizing that now was the perfect moment to burst her bubble. I couldn't wait to drop the bomb on her. Dominique turned her focus to me now, curious to see what I had to say.

"Somehow," my mother said, smirking and leaning across the table, "I am not surprised."

## ESCAPE

The smack stung my cheek and sent me reeling against the wall. My head practically bounced from the impact and I landed on the cold kitchen tile on my side. Usually, I would have stayed down on the floor and waited until she was done hitting me, but I had enough. I quickly stood up and smacked her back across the face! Apparently, my hit wasn't as hard as hers because she remained standing, face turned with my handprint on her cheek. Dominique stood up when she heard me utter the words in the first place, "I'm pregnant."

"Who?" Dominique cried, "How can she be pregnant?"

My mother turned her head back slowly, pressing her hand to her cheek and glaring at me with her black eyes blazing. "Oh, I'm not surprised," she said, "I always knew this little slut would disgrace this family."

"What family?" I asked her, "Honestly *mother*, the only sense of family I ever felt was taken away from me by you the day Daddy died!"

She gasped and hit me, over and over again, over my head, "Don't you ever call him that again!" Over and over again, she said that. Dominique stared in horror, her mouth agape.

Eventually she got tired, or frustrated, and gave up, leaned her back against the wall and shank down to a crouch. I stood over her, looking down at the mess she had become. Dominique ran into the living room. "What are you going to do mother? You can't send a pregnant woman to boarding school," I said.

She looked up at me with a glazed expression. "You'll get rid of it."

I shook my head. "No mother, I won't." Secretly, though, I was afraid she would win and I would never see my baby.

Dominique came in the kitchen with a glass full of bourbon. "What on earth are you doing?" I asked her, "She doesn't need that stuff, and she needs to think clearly." She gave me a look and I backed off. I knew that look, and it meant to stay out of Dominique's way. My mother took the glass and drank it slowly and steadily, staring at us from her spot on the floor. She looked like a child to me then, so helpless and pathetic. About two sips from the end of the drink, she dropped the glass and her head rolled tone side.

"What the...?" I turned and looked at Dominique, "What did you do?"

"I drugged her," she replied, "And it worked. She stopped."

She and I looked at each other and then our mother. What were we going to do? I couldn't be in that kitchen anymore. The sight of our mother slumped against the wall, her skirt pulled up to her thighs and her hands relaxed in such an unnatural way was disturbing me. I ran up the stairs back into the comfort of my bedroom. I climbed up onto my canopy bed and sat against the pillows with my knees to my chest - my classic thinking position. I heard Dominique's footsteps coming up the stairs and then she poked her head in the door. "Do you want to be alone?" she asked me.

"No," I said, "We need to figure out a way out of here."

"What do you mean?" she asked me.

"I mean we need to run away!" I cried, "I can't take this anymore."

Dominique looked sad. "We can't run away," she told me, "She's our mother, and she's the only family we've got." She looked up at me frantically, "Kat, you have to promise me something. You have to *promise* you won't leave me."

I didn't know what else to say, "I promise I won't leave you, Dominique."

She smiled and hugged me. I hugged her back, so happy we had finally become true sisters. I was sad, also. I had just blatantly lied to her face.

I played the hero and told her I would brave going downstairs to the kitchen to get us some warm milk, something she and I had been drinking since we were children to make us go to sleep. Our mother had been the issuer of the warm milk until we were old enough to get it ourselves. Tonight, I needed the warm milk to ensure my baby would have a future. I found the bottle of pills Dominique had used to drug our mother on the liquor cabinet. I took four of them, assuming that would be enough and took them into the kitchen. Avoiding looking at my mother in

a pile on the floor, I grabbed two mugs and filled them with milk, putting the pills in Dominique's mug and microwaved them. I stirred hers up and took them up the stairs to my room.

Dominique was lying on my bed against my pillows. She had put on one of my nightgowns, since she was too self-conscious to sleep in bed with me naked. I handed her the mug with the pills in it and she sipped at it. I waited for a reaction to the taste but instead she asked me a question. "Whose baby is it, Kat?"

I looked at her sadly, "I can't tell you that, Dom."

"Sure you can," she said firmly, "Why can't you tell me? I'm your sister."

"Dom, please," I cried, "I really just can't tell you. Maybe you'll know someday, when you're ready to hear it, but not today and not tomorrow, just *not now!*"

She looked genuinely hurt. "Please Kat. I want to know."

"No!"

"Is it Mike Friedman?" I hadn't thought of him. I understood why she assumed the father to be him, but I shook my head anyways.

"I just can't tell you."

"That bastard," she said, "I could kill him." I said nothing. It was almost better to let her assume I had been with Mike, rather than she hear what I had done with her father. "I just want to know something," she said, "Did you like it?"

"Dominique! Stop!"

"Because I didn't," she said.

I turned and looked at her with a shocked expression, "Dominique! Of course you didn't like it! Mike raped you."

"And got you pregnant."

I didn't say anything. I just sipped my milk and sat quietly, staring into the glass. "I love you, Dom," I said, "Don't ever forget that."

"Ewe!" she said, "Don't get all sappy on me. I've had plenty of that all summer." She started looking sleepy. "I don't want to go to boarding school." That was the last thing I heard her say before she nodded off. I wouldn't hear her voice for a long time after that.

I got up quietly and went to my drawers. I pulled out some clothes, socks and underwear and threw them in my father's old Air Force duffel bag he had given me to go away to overnight camp one summer. I picked up the wooden box that contained the present from my father, which hadn't been opened since the day he left us. That was placed in the duffel bag as well, since it was the most precious and valuable thing I owned. I filled the bag with my toiletries in the bathroom and snuck quietly into what had been my parent's room, and opened the top drawer of my father's desk. When I was younger and home sick from school one day, I had done some snooping in my parent's drawers while my mother went out for groceries, and had found my father's address book. When I had looked through it I saw the contact information for my father's family in Connecticut. Sure enough, the black address book was still there, which I snatched up and stuffed into the duffel bag. Now, I thought, one more thing before I leave.

I paddled down to the kitchen where my mother lay and looked at her for the last time. Her purse was on the counter, which I went into and found about four hundred dollars in a roll. I took it all, blissfully happy that God was on my side, and my plan for escape was all clear. As I walked to the front door, I looked back at the home I had grown so close to over the years. "Goodbye Dominique. Goodbye Daddy," I whispered, and then I walked out the door. I didn't say goodbye to my mother because I knew she would find her way back to me, even if just to ruin my life.

## A NEW WORLD

I really had no plan once I left home, but I knew where I should go. It was already after midnight when I walked out the door. I walked the four blocks to the train station and asked the man sitting in the ticket booth which line I would need to take to get to the bus station. The man looked at me with a funny expression on his face. "You goin' down there all by y'self girlie?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, "I just need to know what line to take."

He gave me instructions for which train to take, and I purchased my ticket and started walking to the platform. "Be careful, girlie!" he called after me. I thanked him and sat down on a bench and waited for the train to come. They were scheduled to arrive and depart every twelve minutes, but I only had to wait about eight minutes before the train came shooting into the station. I got on and took a seat facing forward. For some reason, I would always get sick if I sat facing sideways or backward. I rested my duffel bag on the seat next to the window and propped my head against it, closing my eyes. They popped open immediately when I realized that it would be a terrible idea to fall asleep and miss my stop. I struggled to stay awake, which wasn't easy after not having had a full meal in two months. I had grown accustomed to sleeping to avoid feeling the pains from my hunger. My father had always referred to sleep as "the poor man's dinner", which I fully understood now. Back when I was a well fed individual such things never concerned me.

Since it was the middle of the night, the train was an express train that went straight downtown after about two stops in the city. It was a clear night, I could see from gazing outside the dirty window, with the city sky full of as many stars I had ever seen show up downtown. When I got off at the stop the train conductor had told me was close to the bus station, I had to walk three blocks carrying the heavy duffel bag. I arrived at the bus stop feeling weary, but I had finally arrived, and nothing was going to stop me. I sat down and took my father's address book out of the duffel bag, and opened it to the A-B page. There it was, plain as day: Blackwater, Thomas. He lived in Longmeadow. I looked at the map on the wall and found the nearest big city, which was Hartford. Okay, it was decided. I would take the bus out to Hartford and call my uncle Thomas from there. That way, he couldn't say no to me staying with him, if I had come that far in the first place.

I walked up to the woman in the booth, who was reading a copy of "Soaps Weekly" magazine. "Excuse me," I said, to which she didn't respond. "Hey!" I said, to which she jumped.

"Whaddaya want?" she said, not looking up from her reading.

"I want a ticket to Hartford, Connecticut, please." Now she looked up at me.

"Sorry, honey," she said, "But the next bus doesn't leave until four am. Do you want to buy the ticket?"

Four am? That was two whole hours from now! But what else could I do? I nodded and purchased the ticket from her, shuffling my tired body over to a chair. The safest place I could sit was between an older woman who was reading a paper and a man asleep. I sat and put my bag between my legs, in case anyone should try to move it or take it, and nodded off for an hour and a half. When I woke up, the woman who sold me the bus ticket was shaking me awake. "Hartford, Connecticut!" she said, "That's you, dear!"

I jumped up and grabbed my duffel bag and ran outside. A few people were already on the bus and two people were standing on the steps, waiting to board. I got behind the man who had been sleeping next to me and waited to get on. I couldn't wait to find a seat and relax. When I got on, there were plenty of empty seats, so I made my way to the back of the bus, put my duffel bag under my head, and leaned against it.

When I woke up, we were stopped in Pennsylvania for lunch. Perfect, I thought, as I was absolutely starving and finally had enough money to eat for the first time in weeks. I slung the duffel bag over my shoulder and walked outside, into the depot. There was a diner about thirty feet away which looked so warm and inviting. I walked inside and could smell the aroma from the grill. The scent of hot food made my mouth water intensely, and so I walked up to the counter and sat down. A plump, red haired waitress came up to me immediately after I sat down. Now that's service, I thought. She smiled at me, "You look hungry, hon. What can I get you?"

I smiled. It had been a long time since I was around cheerful people. "I'd like a cheeseburger and fries, please."

"Anything to drink?" I thought about that, and decided to indulge.

"I'll have a strawberry malt."

"Honey, that's exactly my poison," she said, grinning like a Cheshire cat, "If you couldn't already tell by my waistline!" I laughed and thanked her. She told the chef my order and went to take another order.

The meal was exquisite, although I could barely finish half of the burger, and I only picked at the fries. My stomach had shrunk so much over the past two months that all of the food I had so easily wolfed down months ago was so hard for me to digest now. I asked the waitress for a carryout container for my malt and my food, and I headed back toward the bus, fully satiated for the first time in awhile.

For the remainder of the trip, I was pretty bored, until I got the wooden box out of my bag that my father had given me for my birthday. I hesitated before opening it, afraid someone might recognize the value of what was inside and steal it from me. I looked all around the bus, and everyone was involved in either sleeping or reading or staring out the window. I held the box on it's sides in both of my hands and pressed, as my father had shown me. It opened easily and the egg was still nestled in it's blue velvet setting. A piece of paper fluttered to the ground when the box opened, which I quickly snatched up.

My darling Katerina,

I don't know when you will read this, but I'm sure you will have learned a few things at this point. As you probably know, I'm not your real father. I know you will find out who he is one day, so it's not my duty to tell you who he is in this letter.

I'm sure this is the last thing I will ever get to say to you, because I can't live with what I've done to you. You put your trust in me, and I used it to consume you and make you mine. I know your heart will be forever linked with mine for eternity, as I hope mine is with yours.

I promise to watch over you in your life, Katerina, and make sure that no one ever hurts you as much as your mother and I seem to have. Be good to Dominique, as she is your sister, even if you don't share the same father. She is in need of your guidance and instincts.

Your mother and I were never really meant to be together. We were put together by circumstance, and she has grown bitter because of everything life has thrown at her. Please forgive her for being cruel to you. She really loves you, I know that, but she resents how you came into her life.

Please remember that I have always loved you, although in a very different way than a father should. I can't live with that knowledge anymore, so I'm saying goodbye.

I love you always, Katerina.

Love, Tristan

Tears were coursing down my face, and I had to keep from really crying loudly. Why didn't I read this months ago? I would have felt such comfort from hearing those words. He signed his name, not "Daddy" as I had called him all my life. I truly felt connected to him now, and didn't feel as confused as I did before when it still felt like I was carrying my father's baby. My hand went instinctively to my stomach, where my baby was growing. I will love you so much, I thought, I will never treat you the way I've been treated. Questions about my mother and father's relationship grew in my mind. Perhaps when I saw my uncle Thomas, he would shed some light on the past.

When the bus pulled up to the station in Hartford, my heart pounded in my chest. What was I going to do now? I thought that when I made it this far, I would know what to do, but now I didn't have a clue. I got off the bus and went inside the station. Should I call? I pulled the black address book out of my duffel bag and looked at the number. Maybe I should just go there, I thought, but then decided to call instead. I went up to a change machine and got quarters to use the payphone. I nervously dialed the number and let it ring. After three rings, I heard a weary man's voice answer, "Blackwater residence."

"Is this Thomas?" I asked.

"No, may I ask who's calling."

I paused. "Please tell him this is Katerina Blackwater."  
"Just a moment." I nervously waited on my end, praying that my uncle Thomas would be there.

"Hello?" A deeper man's voice came on the line. I took a deep breath and started.

"Uncle Thomas? This is Katerina Blackwater."

A long pause. "Tristan's daughter?"

I hesitated, "Yes, this is she." What else was I supposed to say?

"Well," he said, "This is certainly a surprise. How did you know how to contact me?"

"I have my father's address book."

"Where is your father?"

"He passed away at the end of June," I replied coolly. How could he not know his own brother had died?

"I'm sorry to hear that. What is it that you want?" he asked, rather coldly. I froze, not expecting him to be so direct. However, I wasn't about to back down after I had come this far.

"I – I'm in Hartford," I said, "I had to leave home because...." How much did I want to tell him? "I can tell you that in awhile. I really need you to come and get me. I'll explain everything when I see you. I'd just rather not go into details on a pay phone."

"Understood," he said, "I'll send a car for you. Where exactly are you?"

I told him that I was at the bus station. He instructed me to stay where I was and he would come and get me. I thanked him and hung up the phone. Grabbing my duffel bag, I went outside to wait for him.

Thirty minutes later, a long sleek black limousine pulled up in front of the bus station. The chauffeur stepped out of the driver's seat and walked over to the back of the limo, opened the door and out stepped my uncle Thomas. He was about my father's height, six feet tall, with the same color hair. His eyes were the same shape my father's had been, only they were the color of cold steel. He walked up to me, although I hadn't indicated that I knew him. "You must be Katerina," he said.

"Hello, Uncle Thomas," I said, extending my hand, "I'm happy to finally meet you."

He looked me up and down, studying my face intently. I felt extremely self-conscious, standing in front of the bus station getting inspected like a piece of beef on a hook. He finally looked into my eyes and said, "I'm pleased to finally meet you as well, Katerina. I recognized you immediately. You look just like your mother, from what I remember."

"Yes, I've been told that. Dominique looks like Daddy," I replied, flinching after I had mentioned Dominique. How much did I want to reveal? However, Thomas didn't seem to notice, or ask any questions. I felt relieved as the chauffeur opened the limousine door for me. Thomas was not going to leave me at the bus station, and I was grateful for that. I stepped inside and climbed over to sit on one side. Thomas stepped in after me and sat across, still staring intently at my face. I glanced anywhere I could, not wanting to begin my story but not wanting to sit in complete silence either.

"We're going home, Lewis," my uncle said to his chauffeur. James started up the limousine and seconds later we were pulling away from the bus station into the streets of downtown Hartford. I gazed out the window, taking in the new scenery. As far as I could tell, it was the same as downtown Cleveland; the same McDonald's, and the same Starbucks. Thomas and I sat in the backseat quietly until he broke the silence.

"From what I gather," he began, "You're running away." I froze in alarm. Was it that obvious? "Don't worry," he said, "I'm not going to call your mother. I know what kind of a woman she can be." How would he know that? I started to speak but he stopped me. "I don't want you to explain anything to me yet," he said, "We can do that after we arrive, in my office at home. I usually prefer speaking to people in my own surroundings. I try not to conduct a lot of business from a vehicle."

"Thank you," I said, "I agree with you, uncle Thomas. I would rather explain my situation after I'm out of a moving vehicle. Something I've grown used to these past two days."

"That's another thing," he said, "Please call me Tom. No 'Uncle', no 'Thomas', just Tom. When I hear 'Thomas' I think of my father."

I smiled. "Okay, Tom. Thank so for accommodating me on such short notice."

He smiled slightly, running his fingers through his thick brown hair, "Apparently you share few traits with your mother other than your appearance. She was never very polite." I was interested in what else Tom had to say about my mother. There would be more time for that later, I thought. I started listening to Tom describe Blackwater Hall, the place where he lived and where my father had grown up.

"The Blackwaters have been in the publishing business for over a hundred years," he was saying, "I'm sure you've heard of Blackwater Books." I nodded. My father had told me about his family's business when I was a little girl, and I loved to browse the books in the bookstore and see my name printed on the covers. "I took over the company when my father and mother died in a car accident. Your father was written into the will by my father as a partner. My father's intention was to have Tristan and me run the business and when Trevor was old enough, he would also become a partner," he sighed heavily, "Your father immediately went into the Air Force after our parents died, and Trevor still doesn't show much interest in running the business."

I didn't know my father had the opportunity to run his family's publishing business! Why did my father choose to go to the Air Force and ultimately become a pilot? Didn't he realize that he might have made my mother happy if he stayed in Connecticut and became a partner for Blackwater Books? She never would have complained about money with the rich lifestyle that came with running a huge business such as the one my uncle Tom now ran. Regardless, I now listened to Tom describe Blackwater Hall to me.

"It's a spectacular Gothic mansion," he bragged, "Full of surprises around every corner. There are secret passages and even hidden rooms. It's the perfect place to get lost in." He chuckled. My excitement grew in anticipation of seeing the home my father had grown up in. "We're almost there," he told me, noting my exhilaration.

I gazed out the window, seeing nothing but hills, grass and a few colonial houses peppered along the road. Lewis, my uncle's chauffeur, pulled up to a large black wrought iron gate and stopped. The words, "Blackwater Hall" were displayed in large black letters above the gate. Lewis pressed a button on the dashboard and the gates slowly opened.

"Here we are," said Tom, "My wife Eleanor will be very taken with you. She adores fawning over young teenage girls, as she was never able to have any children of her own, and I know she's always wanted a daughter," he looked wistful as he spoke.

"Your wife?" I asked. I didn't remember my father ever telling me about Tom's wife.

"Yes," Tom replied, "Nora and I have been married for only ten years, so your father and her never met." He saw me staring agape at the lush, green grounds with perfectly landscaped gardens. "Look at the fountain over there," he said, pointing off in the distance. I turned and saw the most incredible fountain I had ever seen displayed just in front of someone's house. This was unreal! There was a large statue of a man on a bucking horse, with water spewing at them from either side. I tried my hardest to keep from laughing at the audacity of putting a statue right on the lawn that looked like it belonged in Rome.

"That's our relative," Tom said, "Thomas Spencer Blackwater the first. He was the founder of Blackwater Books." He chuckled to himself and mumbled, "Your father always found that statue to be tacky."

Now I could laugh, "Well, frankly. So do I!"

Tom smiled. "You actually are like him, in many ways." His voice had an element of surprise that I detected. Did Tom know about me? He seemed to know something that he wasn't revealing, and I was determined to eventually find out.

Lewis pulled up at the front door, and from what I saw I could barely speak. I had never seen a house so huge! Actually, to describe it as merely huge wouldn't do the structure justice. Blackwater Hall was a castle, with the giant arched stained glass windows that stretched from floor to ceiling all the way around the perimeter of the first floor. The house was built from a tan limestone, with marble columns reaching up to a balcony on the second floor. I could see myself standing on that balcony in a ball gown, waiting for my lover to meet me for some huge event for Blackwater Books – what a romantic I was turning out to be! When I walked up the granite steps to the massive wooden door that looked like something out of the middle ages, with giant brass door knockers and a plaque that read "Blackwater Hall ~ 1876" which I assumed was the year the mansion was built. I practically screamed when the door inwardly creaked open to reveal a shriveled prune of a man. "Good afternoon, miss. May I take you bag?"

Tom stepped in. "Davis, this is my niece, Katerina Blackwater. She will be staying with us for the time being. Could you please have Veronica take her bag upstairs to Mrs. Blackwater's room."

Davis looked surprised, "Yes sir. Very good to meet you Miss Blackwater."

"Thank you, Davis. It's nice to meet you as well." He shuffled off to some dark corridor and disappeared. I turned in circles in the front hallway, gazing at all of the marvelous furniture and décor I had ever laid eyes on. I marveled at the spectacular paintings that were larger than any of the walls in my Akron home. Statues surrounded me from every angle, some marble and even a pair of knights that were so typical of what I saw in museums, I almost reached out to touch one. I didn't touch anything, though. I was almost afraid to breathe. Suddenly, from nowhere appeared a beautiful woman on the grand red-carpeted staircase, in a white gown that looked entirely too elaborate to be wearing before evening. Her blond hair was clipped just below her ears and formed a neat gold cap of waves on her head. She was thinner than my mother, and smaller as well, seeming to be barely over five feet tall. Her collarbone was jutting forward unnaturally, as though it was attempting to leap out of her chest. However, she was still very beautiful, with large and watery blue eyes framed by dark mascaraed lashes. Tom beamed as she walked down the staircase toward us.

"Eleanor," he began, "I'd like you to meet my niece, Katerina. Katerina, this is my wife, Eleanor, but I'm sure she'll just want you to call her Nora."

Nora giggled and stepped up to me, staying on the last stair to avoid looking up at me. I later would learn that it was very important for Nora to maintain eye contact with people, for it was how she would get others to reveal information to her. "Hello, Katerina!" she cried, hugging me so I was encased in her bony arms. I hugged her back, though I didn't enjoy feeling her shoulder blades jutting out from her back. "Oh, it's so nice to finally meet some of Tom's relatives. You're Tristan's daughter, I would assume?" I nodded. "How wonderful!" she exclaimed, "Where is Tristan? When will I finally get to meet your famous brother?" she asked Tom.

Tom sighed, "Dear, Tristan has passed away. Katerina and I need to discuss a few things, so would you mind excusing us shortly before dinner? We need to talk in my office."

"Of course, darling," Nora replied, and smiled at me. "Katerina, I am so sorry to hear about your father. I know Tom and Tristan were always so fond of him. I am so glad to finally meet you, though, despite the circumstances." She squealed with delight, clapped her hands together, and turned to prance upstairs. "I'm going to get ready for dinner. See you then!" I stared up after her, elated that she was so kind to me, but elusive because I was not accustomed to adults behaving in such a carefree manner.

I followed Thomas into his office which was a room just off of the main hallway downstairs. I was exhausted, and I wanted to bathe and sleep but I knew I'd have to take care of business first. The thought running through my head and scaring me to death was that after Tom heard my story he wouldn't be so willing to let me stay at Blackwater Hall. Quite frankly, I was scared to stay in such a huge mansion, but excited at the same time. I wanted to experience something new and different from my life in Akron, and Blackwater Hall seemed to be the magical escape I had been dreaming about for years.

Tom's office was similar to the front hallway of Blackwater Hall. It was facing the front of the house so there were three floor to ceiling stained glass windows on one wall, and rows and rows of books on the opposite wall, also stretching from floor to ceiling for the entire wall. Most of the books looked older, antique copies of classics that were probably never read. Tom's desk was a large, intimidating oak desk that made anyone who was sitting behind it the focal point of the room. Off to the side was a chess set with elegantly carved ivory chess pieces that were of the Chinese style. Tom indicated that I should sit across from him at the desk and when I did, I felt insignificant next to him.

"Now then," he began, taking a pipe out of the top drawer of his desk. He tapped out the ash into a crystal ashtray on his desk and began to pack it full of tobacco. When he finally got it lit, he began again. "Now then," he repeated, "I assume you'll give me the answers I ask for."

"Yes sir."

"Good," he said, "I truly hate liars, and I can tell you if you ever lie to me, I will know. I want to know your full story and I want to know why you came here, of all places, the place your father ran away from so long ago."



I was livid! How could he demand answers from me and be so elusive about my father and why he left this place? Why was I putting up with this arrogant man? I had no place to go, that was why. If Tom couldn't help me, where could I turn? My mother? I had to wait until my baby was born before I could go back to her again, *if* I would go back to her. Right now, I trusted one person – myself. "Where should I begin?" I asked.

"Tell me why you're here."

I hesitated. What have you got to lose? "I'm pregnant," I replied, coolly. "My mother wanted me to get rid of it, which is why I ran away. I don't want to give up my baby. I came here because I had no other place to go."

Tom looked down at me with his steel eyes, "So you run away to your father's family so you and your boyfriend can have your baby here, get married, run away and live happily ever after? I won't give you any money."

"I don't want your money!" I shouted, and began to sob. "I didn't ask for this to happen to me. It isn't my fault."

Tom smirked, "It takes two, I'm sure you realize." I must have been turning red, because I was fuming. Thoughts were scattering through my brain, making it difficult for me to sort them out. I tried to avoid revealing the worst part to him, but I felt I had to, otherwise Tom wasn't going to let me stay.

"The baby is my father's, Tom. I am going to have Tristan's baby."

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