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The Light Keeper (temp title) by

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SAMPLE PAGES

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She is in a great mood by the time she gets to her art class a whole ten minutes early. Figuring Lewis is still at lunch, she tests the door to find it unlocked and nudges it open. She stops when she hears his voice inside, then slowly inches the door open, peeking her head inside, curious but not wanting to get in trouble for interrupting something important.

He stands at the art wall adjacent to the teacher's desk, talking on a call, cell phone cradled between his shoulder and his ear, holding in one hand a stack of drawings while unpinning a drawing from the wall with his other. She notices several bare spots from where he has taken down other drawings, although it's too far away for her to see which ones he took. Maybe he is finally taking down some of the bad art that Mrs. DeVries refuses to take down no matter how much Maddie complains about them. She understands that not all the other kids can draw as well as her, but why should they all have their art hung on the wall when it just takes away from all the other better work. Given her recent after-hours violation in the art room, Maddie decides to wait in the doorway for him to notice and give permission to come in.

As he continues collecting drawings from the wall with his back to her Maddie tries to be as patient as she can while he continues his conversation:

"I'm putting them all together now, but I'd really prefer just to give you copies. Yes, I know. Some of them *are* sentimental. So, what time should we expect you? ...Perfect. We have another interview lined up just before, but we can keep it short... Yes, Ella will take care of all the paperwork in the meantime... ...No, we haven't said anything and probably won't. It's better just to explain as we go given past reactions...

...I think it might be good to watch that together as well, see if it stirs anything... ..I'm afraid not. We just have so little to work on, which has been the problem and why we can use the extra eyes... Thanks... ..I have my reservations, but I appreciate your quick response.”

Unable to bear standing there any longer Maddie groans and lets all her weight fall on the door, swinging it all the way open and stumbling forward with it, trying to keep it from crashing into the ends of the art shelves. Lewis spins around noticing her.

“I have to run. Talk to you tomorrow. Maddie! You're a few minutes early. Come on in and have a seat at the table while I wrap up a few things.”

Maddie goes to her usual spot at the table by the window. She puts her things down and as Lewis tucks his papers into a folder, she takes a quick peek out the window, delighted to see them beyond the courtyard gate, seated at their usual bust stop just across the street: the old hobo and his dog. Maddie smiles every time she sees them, having become as reliable as to her as Lewis and Auntie. The old man is hunched over on the bench, as always, Maddie perpetually unable to tell if he is awake or asleep, with his shaggy old dog thoughtfully sitting at his side.

When Lewis comes over with two art bins, the folder filled with drawings tucked under his arm, Maddie sits up straight and turns her eyes right to him. He won't have to fight for her attention today. She's on track to making up for yesterday and getting back in everyone's' good standing—especially Lewis. She grimaces though when she sees the faded coffee spill from the morning still staining his shirt. Catching her expression, he glances at his shirt and gives the briefest look of annoyance before softening to his usual warm smile.

He drops down in one of the small student chairs across the table from her.

“So, my young artist, what masterpieces do you have in you today? I thought given some of the recent changes we might try something different.”

Sitting the art bins down, he takes the lid off one and pushing it towards her, she peers inside to see colored chunks of clay. Catching her expression as falling somewhere between disappointment and disapproval, he asks: “Is that a ‘no’? I thought maybe you had taken up a renewed interest in sculpting?” He makes the slightest gesture with his head indicating something over his shoulder. Maddie glances up at the teacher’s desk just behind him, reminding her of her sculptured box she had placed there last night. Looking down quickly, Maddie grabs the other bin, prying off the top, fishing amongst the assorted colored crayons piled inside.

“No, let’s draw,” Maddie says with more emphasis than intended.

“I see you brought your pencil box. Do you want to use your colored pencils, then?”

Maddie pulls the box closer to herself, dropping it to her lap. “No, crayons are good.”

Despite being off to such a good day, Maddie doesn’t know why she’s suddenly feeling anxious about her favorite activity. Fumbling absently through the crayons she finally settles on her standard blue for starting the sky. Trying to fill in the top area of the paper, she realizes the crayon is too short for her hand, so she sifts through the bin for another. Continuing where she left off, she quickly rejects the crayon realizing it is a slightly different blue, then fishes again for the right one.

“Are you going to draw another house today?”

Maddie nods. Unable to find the right blue she decides to go straight to yellow for drawing the sun. That part is the funner to draw anyway.

“I want to ask you a question Maddie: Do you remember this drawing?”

She glances momentarily at the crude kid’s drawing he pulls from the manilla folder, scribbled with a black and red crayon. It is so bad it takes her a second to realize it is hers from the wall, the one with a tall rectangular box broken up with smaller boxes, and inside one of them, two primitive stick figures, one obviously a person, the other she can’t make out.

“This was one of the first drawings you ever did for us. Do you remember it?”

Maddie shakes her head glancing up at where she had re-pinned her drawing on top, then noticing all the other blank spots on the wall she turns back to drawing her house with renewed intent, really wanting Lewis to like this one. She decides to skip straight to the house, thankfully coming across an unused brown pencil for framing the walls and peaked roof.

“I have a lot of your old drawings here Maddie. Would you take a look at them for me?”

He spreads out five or six drawings on the table, all crude and darkly scrawled. She glances at them then nudges them away so as not to cover her in-progress drawing. She starts coloring in the house. Maybe this one will be his new favorite.

“All of your old drawings have these shapes, Maddie. You don’t know what they might be? These dark squares that sometimes have one or two people in them? And there’s this tall shape here that is also common. And look at this one. Do you notice how

it is different?" He taps the paper and Maddie begrudgingly looks. The tall rectangle in one drawing has lines coming out of the top of it.

"It's kind of like how you draw your suns, isn't it?"

"I don't draw them like that anymore. That's how kids draw suns." She turns her drawing toward him, showing the big yellow sun without lines or face. Instead, it is surrounded by a wavy outer shape.

"That's the corona," Maddie points out. "We learned about it in class. You can only see it with certain instruments."

She taps the drawing as he had, but he seems no more interested in her new drawing than she is in the old. Thinking it needs more colors she scours through the box of crayons for a color she hasn't used yet.

"What is interesting to me is that even your drawings from a few years ago have some of these recurring shapes? I think they are very significant Maddie. They obviously meant something to you and I'm curious why you don't draw them anymore."

Digging through the crayons she doesn't even hear him until he repeats himself. "Maddie, why do you think you don't do these kinds of drawings anymore?"

"Because they're sad."

"Sad? Why do you suppose they are sad?"

Maddie suddenly bounds up in her seat, startling Lewis. She holds up the stub of a silver crayon she hadn't used yet and starts coloring in clouds furiously, hoping to make the most of it before it is too small to hold.

"Do these drawings make you sad?"

She drops her head low over her drawing, intent on her work and tired of the questioning. “No. They made other people sad.”

“Other people? Who?”

She waves a hand in front of her without even lifting her head. “You. Teachers. Whoever.” She feels herself getting angry. Her hand is cramping, the silver crayon is turning her fluffy clouds to a dark heavy gray when it is supposed to be light and sparkly. She feels like the crayon lied to her and she want him to stop distracting her with all this old stuff. She doesn’t even remember doing the drawings. Maybe they aren’t even hers.

He leans toward her, speaking closer to her ear. “Why do you think these makes me sad? Your teachers sad?”

She presses the silver crayon harder and the stub flips out of her hand, tearing the drawing. Furious, she pounds the table and shoves the paper away, dropping it to the floor.

“I don’t know!” She shouts out, picking up the stub and pounding it into the table until it is pot-marked with dabs of gray and the stub is flat and bent in her hand. “They didn’t make anyone happy. People just ask weird questions like you and then put them away. No one wants to put them up because nobody likes them!”

He leans over and picks up her rumpled drawing, smoothing it out on the table. “Is that why you are drawing these houses now Maddie?”

“I don’t know. I thought that’s what you wanted me to draw. I thought you liked them.”

“Like my favorite drawings on your bedroom wall?”

“I thought you liked them.” She looks at the other house drawings on the table, wondering why they don’t seem to work now. She drops her head on the table feeling as though something is different with them, like some color missing. She bites nervously on the small crayon then catches herself and slips it into her pocket under the table.

Lewis is silently looking at one of her most recent drawings, nearly identical to the one she was just working on: kid and dog standing with mother and father inside a big boxy house surrounded by clouds, sun, and sky.

“I’m sorry Maddie.” He looks up at her smiling and reaches out messing her hair. “I do like that drawing. Very much. I like all your drawings, even the sad ones.”

“But you don’t like my houses anymore?”

“Well, your drawings were a way to help me help you. But maybe we don’t need to do this anymore.”

She looks up, startled. “What do you mean?”

“It means maybe you don’t need to do any more drawings for me in our sessions.”

“But I like drawing!”

“You can still draw, kiddo. It’s just that you can draw for yourself, or different teachers.”

“Do I get to draw with Auntie Ella again?”

“No honey. She is the Director and is responsible for all the kids now, not just you, though I know she very much wishes she could be with you more.”

Maddie’s stomach starts to ache, and she wants to chew on the crayon desperately now. She fingers it restlessly in her pocket, scrapping off pieces with her nails. “But I don’t understand. Do I have to go to some other families’ house again?”

Lewis waves his hands, his eyes shifting to the bare table away from her drawings. “No. If anything it might mean we postpone placement for a while, until we are sure you are ready.”

The ache in her stomach unfolds and seems to slowly turn into butterflies. “So, what, I get to stay?! I can stay in my new room?” She wants to hold her breath but now it is moving in and out so quickly.

“Maddie, all it means right now is that Ella has someone who wants to meet you and ask you some very easy questions. But it’s very important you be completely honest with them.” He taps at the drawing. “You don’t need to tell them what you think they want to hear.”

“If I’m honest, will I get to stay?”

“The more honest you can be, the better job they can do at making the right decision.”

He goes quiet for a moment, his eyes seeming to glisten. He looks hard at her latest drawing. “I think this is my new favorite Maddie.”

“It’s not done. It’s ugly.” She says, “It shouldn’t go on the wall.”

“Actually, I was hoping I could take this one home. Would you mind?”

She looks up at Lewis, nods, and smiles, but when she glances past him at the wall covered with the whole history of kids who have passed through Gladstone’s, except for the empty spots where Maddie’s many drawings had hung, she feels empty herself, as though she has never really existed.

Gripping the table, she looks out the window desperate to find the comforting sight of the old man and dog still sitting just beyond the courtyard gate, but the bench sits

empty. Lewis is talking as she adjusts her position to peer beyond the gates to see where they might have wandered off to, but Maddie doesn't listen until he puts a hand on her shoulder.

“How about a break? You want to go in the yard for a bit of free time while I tidy up?”

Maddie leaps out of her seat with her pencil box and rushes out the door and around the corner to the courtyard doors in the main hall. She is relieved to be alone outside and runs up to the gate, peering between the ivy-covered bars to look for them in the street beyond. Still no sign of them, she wanders over to the fractured center of the courtyard, sets down her box, and drops her knees into the sharp debris of prickly dry leaves and twigs. She reaches her arms around the leaning trunk, unable to even get her hands halfway around it, and hugs it with all her strength, enjoying the familiar roughness against her skin. She ignores the kids looking out the windows at her from the other classrooms, pretending she is just as invisible as her drawings in the art room.

Realizing her hands and shirt are covered with drops of sticky milky sap, she pulls away from the poor stump, but rubbing her hands only makes them dirtier, so she rises and goes to the water hose at the far end of the courtyard to rinse it off. As the cold water trickles through her fingers, she looks up and is startled to spot Mustard in the window of the Director's Office.

Standing between the Executive Director and Director, Mustard looks tiny compared to them. Even just next to Auntie, in her tall heels, the Gladstone's Bully just looks like any other kid. From the courtyard, Maddie can just make out their raised

voices coming from the open window. When Mustard turns away from them to look out the window, Maddie finds she can only return his glare with sudden sympathy.

She hears the crack of breaking twigs and turns to see Lewis approaching her. Maddie feigns at drying her hands and walks back towards him trying to act as casual as possible. A rise in the voices emanating from the window catches Lewis attention: "They are sure giving him the once-over, huh?"

"What's a once-over?" Maddie asks, meeting Lewis mid-courtyard, near the trunk.

Lewis pauses before answering: "You, know I really don't know where that phrase comes from. Funny, how often we say these things we don't even know the original meaning of. What I meant is that it sounds like they are being pretty tough on Felix in there."

Maddie shrugs and says assuredly: "It's because he's so bad."

"Well, he is certainly troubled. And it's quite likely he's been stealing money from the staff. But you probably know him better than anyone else here given both your long histories here. Do you think he is bad?"

Maddie turns away from the window so she doesn't have to feel guilty talking about Mustard while he is being yelled at and looks down at the ground as she starts nudging debris away from her with her sandals.

"I guess. I mean, he's a jerk."

"That is a fair assessment. Is that what makes him bad?"

"Part. He's mean. And angry. And always breaking the rules. That's all bad."

“Well, it is certainly bad behavior, but do you think that makes him a bad person?”

Maddie draws her attention away from the pile of tree debris she’s begun scooping into a pile to squint questioningly at Lewis’s inquisitive expression.

“What do you mean?”

“Does doing a bad thing make you a bad person?”

Maddie turns away, back down to her clearing work on the ground as they start walking forward across the courtyard, hiding the fact she doesn’t know the answer he is looking for.

“Let me ask you this: Do you think you are bad?”

Maddie reflexively turns, snapping at him with a defiant, drawn-out, “NOOooo!!”

“That’s good. But have you ever done a bad thing?”

“Well, kind of. Yes,” Maddie softens as she thinks about it. “I mean, I try not to.”

“But you still get in trouble sometimes?”

Maddie nods, feeling the rise of understanding now compounded with guilt.

“Climbing the roof was bad…” Maddie says out loud, not sure if it is coming out as a statement or a question.

“That’s also fair to say,” Lewis says in agreement, looking up towards the spot where Maddie had climbed out from. “Climbing the roof WAS pretty bad, but mainly in the sense that you could have truly hurt yourself, even killed, had you fallen. You got yourself in fairly big trouble for that, but does that make you a BAD person?”

Maddie looks at him, searching for answers in his expectant face, but slowly shakes her head ‘no’ as she feels the answer surface within her.

“You see? No one is simply good or bad. People are complicated. We all are capable of doing good things just as much as we are bad. Sometimes we even bad things for good reasons.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like maybe your friend Mustard there...”

“He’s NOT my friend.” Maddie interrupts as Lewis continues: “Maybe Mustard isn’t doing bad things just to be bad. Maybe he simply has grown up with so much fear and hurt that being a ‘jerk’ is the only way he knows how to protect himself from those feelings.”

“I already know that.” Maddie declares. “That’s why he always acts like such a bully.”

“Oh, you do know that already?!” Lewis asks with the sound of pleasant surprise.

“It’s so obvious.” She declares, crossing her arms.

“Well, how about you then?” Lewis asks her sharply, catching her off guard.

“I’m not a bully!!”

“Of course you’re not. But are you good or bad?”

The bell rings, snapping Maddie out of the question and glances behind her seeing the long clean path she has cleared across the courtyard, and the Director’s office window now empty. She smiles at Lewis as he nods his for her to join the others in switching periods.

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Over the remainder of her classes, Maddie continues applying extra effort to being good and even manages to slip out with a couple more hidden supplies, the trickiest being the small plastic flashlight she has to smuggle under her armpit with her arm uncomfortably pressed to her side. She even goes so far as to check in on every new kid during recess to make sure none are being harassed by Mustard. The fact she never even sees him in the yard makes her no less vigilant as it seems now more important than ever to show she is nothing like him.

Maddie rushes through dinner, eating so little and so quickly that she returns her plate of meatloaf and veggies just minutes later, nearly as full as she received it. She rushes right back to her room almost annoyed she had to make the appearance in the dining room at all.

Closing the door behind her, Maddie wedges underneath her door the doorstop she had taken before the start of math class. She felt bad about not being able to tell the truth when the teacher asked the class where it had gone off to, then had to suffer through the room's stuffy warmth along with everyone else. But she's just borrowing it and will bring it right back and will even work extra hard next time even though she finds math so boring.

Turning around, Maddie freezes, seeing her drawings scattered on the floor in front of the exposed vent. Kneeling in front of it, setting her things on the floor Maddie holds her hand against the grate, not feeling the cool pull, nor hearing the hum for that matter. She scoops her drawings into a loose pile when suddenly the hum kicks again and the loose papers begin to flutter. She slaps two drawings against it and shrugs as they hold.

“Guess I need to find a better way to keep you hidden for when you are turned off?”

She loosens the one screw holding in the vent and pulls it easily away, giggling as her the two drawings fall back to the floor. Setting aside the vent, she leans inside the large opening announcing a friendly: “Hello!” that echoes softly back at her. She turns on the small flashlight shining it inside, but to her disappointment the light is too small and weak to illuminate the darkness more than a few feet inside. But it is the best she can do as anything bigger would have been too difficult to smuggle back to her room.

She pulls one of the cookies from the snack-stuffed pencil box, holding it in her mouth, as she pulls out a small ball of red yarn swiped during crafts. Closing the box and placing it in the vent ahead of her, she ties the end of the red yarn around her waist and drops the ball on the floor. Draping the blanket over her shoulders and tying it off around her neck like a child’s cape, Maddie holds out the flashlight and pushes her way into the duct, the large ball of red yarn unspooling as she disappears inside.

Once she is fully immersed in the darkness and her eyes have adjusted beyond the transitional fireworks and zigzagging sparkles, the darkness begins to reveal more of itself in the faint beam of her flashlight. She shimmies forward on her hands and knees, the blanket on her back occasionally snagging against the top of the duct when she accidentally rubs against it. She pushes her pencil box ahead of her with one hand, while she uses the other to periodically sweep the distance with the flashlight.

The deeper she goes the more excited she becomes, feeling the stark coolness against her bare hands, knees, and feet, the more she feels the cool movement of air around her and the more thankful she is she brought the blanket despite having to

constantly keep from getting snagged or tangled. She stops to check the yarn tied around her waist, then shines the light back to see how far she has come to estimate how much yarn is left on the ball but is surprised to see the bright square of the room not that far behind her.

Splaying out on her side Maddie shines the light on her hands and knees revealing how red and dirty they already are from this short distance. After treating herself to another cookie she pushes on, struggling to find the right position to minimize her snags and scrapes against the duct's segmented edges. Little to see in the darkness ahead, she keeps imagining the duct will open up to an immense void suddenly plunging her headlong into a new and dark universe.

She begins to notice a subtle shift in sound, but within a few feet she finds it is not from the sudden drop off in her mind, but the all too sudden end of the duct! She stops, adjusting her position again to take the weight off her hands and knees. Even as she tries to rub the soreness out of her toes and the tops of her feet, she had no intention of stopping so soon.

"This isn't right!" she says out loud, surprising herself with the volume of her own voice in the small confines. "This isn't right." She says again with much more restraint. "You have to lead somewhere..."

She looks over her shoulder, shining the light around the sides of the duct behind her in case she missed something. Shining the light forward again she notices the movement of shadows playing across the far end of the duct. Scooting closer to the end, she is delighted to realize the duct actually opens up to either side as a T-shaped junction.

Her excitement bursts forth again as she sweeps the light back and forth, now not even needing it because tiny spots of illumination run down the lengths of each direction end, showing her exactly how long and how big each pathway is: to her left the duct stretches far into the distance with numerous patches of light, but small enough that she would have to push through on her belly, a feat she is not up for at this point especially as she has no idea how she could turn around. The air coming from that end smells like bleach and laundry soap, and a low telling her must be from the laundry room.

The duct to her right then would run towards the staff rooms. The duct is larger, the steady hum of air louder. Maddie can't believe her luck: if the vent was so useful for hearing into Ella's office, then this duct could be her way to hear everything from the staff's rooms, and maybe more, depending on where they lead. Realizing others may be as able to hear her as much as she can hear them, she takes more caution, proceeding as slowly, quietly, and carefully as she can down the rightward passage.

The first dim light from another vent like the one from her room. Beyond it Maddie can just make out a small dark room filled with what she assumes to be large equipment of some sort based on the small colored light, humming sounds and warmth funnels through. Finding the vent is also just loosely connected at the top, she curls around with her back against the opposite side of the duct, plants her hands against the warm shaft floor and, using as much strength and leverage as she can in the cramped space, pushes her feet against the grate until the vent bends out far enough for her to squeeze her way through and roll down onto the bare cement floor of the new space.

The room is bigger than what she saw from the duct, the shapes she could barely make out are large metal panels and boxes lining the walls and dividing it into sections,

interconnected with metal pipes, ducts and conduits reminding her of the equipment from the roof. The warmth is noticeable but not hot, just the kind warmth that's right for sleeping without a blanket. She shines the flashlight around seeing colored signs and stickers on everything: 'Warning: Electrocutation Risk', 'Do Not Touch', 'Caution', 'Shock Hazard', 'Main Switch'. Numerous small lights scattered around the panels give the room its dim colorful illumination. Soft overlapping shadows crisscross all sides of the room making some spaces lighter, others dimmer, some redder in color, others bluer or greener. Blinking lights on one panel remind her of a Christmas tree and the whole room overall feels safe and cozy despite what all the signs say. She can't believe the luck that she now has the key to unlocking so many more secret and mysterious spaces. The freedom from her window in reaching the topmost spaces of Gladstone's now seems nothing compared to where the crawlspace can take her.

She returns to the bent grate to retrieve her blanket and pencil box, then crouches into one of the many shadowed spaces carved out between pipes, conduits, and large paneled boxes. Before laying out her blanket, she notices cigarette butts scattered across the floor and a few empty beer cans tucked away in one corner of the room. Annoyed, she sweeps the butts away with her feet, smearing streaks of ash across the floor and stirring up their stinky smell. She is then shocked to discover the most disgusting photos of a naked woman taped to one of the metal boxes. She yanks them off, not caring if they tear and she shreds them in her hands, stuffing them in a gap behind the box. How anyone in the world would want to look at such gross pictures, she can't imagine. Maybe that's why they were hidden here? When satisfied with her cleaning, she folds her blanket

over twice and settles herself down on the floor to stretch the stiffness out of her arms and legs, grateful to no longer feel the press of walls all around her.

Opening the pencil box, she sets out all her food options in front of her.

Surprisingly hungry, she dives into the softer, smashed foods first, chewing and humming to herself while she sets out less perishable snacks atop nearby surfaces. She pulls out the small desk clock she decided to borrow from one of her teachers to help her keep track of time. Setting it on another surface she is shocked to see only ten minutes have passed since she first entered the duct! It can't be right, but she double-checked it against the main room clock before taking it.

She leans back against a warm panel, feeling its gentle vibration wash through her entire body. Amazing how in the dark of these living, breathing spaces, time passes differently. So warm, tired, and relaxed, Maddie feels she has found her way into the very beating heart of Gladstone's itself. She runs her hand along one of the large pipes cutting through the room just like the one in her room.

"You are my secret now," Maddie says aloud to the room. "And I am your secret. Nobody else will ever know about us. We can take care of each other!"

Excited, Maddie leaps up, lightly bumping her head an overhanging pipe. Moving about surveying the room she declares: "I'll get more blankets so I can sleep right down there. I'll keep food over there, and I can hang extra clothes and shoes over here in case they get too dirty. Oh, this is going to be so perfect! You are my room now. No more stupid foster families and foster homes. I'm not going to leave and you're not going to be alone anymore." She rubs her hand against the wall reassuringly and breaths in the mildly

dusty, smokey smell of the room, and makes a mental note to borrow a can of deodorizer next time she passes near the supply cabinet.

Deciding to leave her blanket and snacks for her next visit, Maddie makes surprisingly quick time on the crawl back to her room. Securing the vent back in place, she re-dresses her artwork making a note to get tape for reinforcing her cover. Feeling so tired she almost feels like she is floating, she drops onto her bed, pulling the nautically patterned sheet over herself. The room feels colder to her now, and so big, so exposed. She'll get more blankets in the morning, for both of her rooms. As she closes her eyes, she sees the duct stretching out ahead of her, distant lights calling her to discover their mysteries.

Maddie wakes to a gentle knocking at her door. She sits up in bed not knowing if someone was actually at her door or if she had dreamt it. She hears the knock again followed by the director's soft voice:

“Maddie, wake up honey. It's me, Ella.”

Maddie glances over to the vent to make sure it is hasn't all come down again. Relieved her collage camouflage is still holding, she reflexively tries to fix her hair but notices how filthy her hands still are. Throwing back the bedsheet she sees her feet are even filthier. Maddie yanks the sheet back over herself pulling it tight around her.

“Maddie, sorry if I'm waking you. It's still fifteen minutes before Wake Up.”

As the door swings open, it knocks aside the useless doorstop Maddie had left there from the day before. As Auntie strolls in, Maddie is put at ease by her shoulder-length gray hair falling loosely from her head way she used to wear it before becoming

Director. She walks up to her bed, not noticing the vent and Maddie pulls up her knees as Auntie Ella surprisingly sits down on it next to her. She has to pull even harder at the sheet to keep it covering herself, so Ella doesn't find out how dirty she really is underneath.

“I also want to talk to you for a minute since we don't get to spend that much time together anymore.”

There is an awkward pause as Ella sits sideways on the bed, looking straight ahead at the dresser where Maddie has tucked away her dirty clothes, as though she sees straight through them. After a moment she turns to face Maddie, her expression soft and warm: “How are you?”

Maddie shrugs, accidentally popping out her shoulders before cinching herself lower into the sheet held tight by Ella's weight.

“I—I brought you something,” she says, pulling out from behind her a little plant Maddie had somehow not noticed. She sets it on the bedside nightstand beside the carved reading lamp, turning it slightly to show off a good angle. “It's a baby Towering Ficus. I clipped it from one of my house plants. I thought it could help make your new room feel a little homier.”

Maddie looks at the small bright green leaves stark against the white wall and has to stop herself from reaching out to touch it.

“I know it's not much to look at yet, but it's quite robust as it doesn't need a lot of light so if you take care of it just right it can actually grow into a tree about as tall as you.” She strokes one of the delicate affectionately. “I'm sorry I haven't been able to do more for you, Maddie. Especially lately.”

“That’s okay,” Maddie says, “I know you are busy now.”

Ella smiles, but her answer only seems to make her look more apologetic. “How do you like spending so much time with Lewis now?”

“I like it,” Maddie answers. “Lewis is fun, and he lets me draw all the time.”

“I know he does. I still look at everything you make. You are becoming quite the talented artist, my dear,” she says leaning over to peer at drawings still thankfully clinging to the vent. “I see you’ve got quite the art gallery coming along over here.”

Maddie leans forward to block her view, blurting out, “Do you ever want to do art with me again?”

Ella looks back quickly, her eyes turning serious: “I would love to do some art with you again. I miss that more than anything.”

Maddie nods, faint feelings and memories beginning to swirl in her head. “Can we do it today?” she probes cautiously.

Ella reaches out to caress Maddie’s cheek like she used to, then hesitates and instead runs her hand over Maddie’s head, patting down her disheveled hair. “I have no idea how you always manage to get such crazy bedhead. I still think you have a bedhead fairy living in there who just goes crazy every night.”

Maddie smiles, enjoying the feeling of contact between them again. As she is about to reach out to take her hand, the director pulls away and Maddie quickly pulls her dirty hand back beneath the sheet.

“Can we draw today?” Maddie asks again, daring to be more hopeful.

“Oh, I wish we could darling. But we have a couple of special meetings today and I’m afraid you won’t be having your art session. That’s one of the things I wanted to tell

you.” She straightens up and begins tying up her silver hair. “Lewis may have mentioned it to you. We have a couple of visitors coming today who would like to ask you some questions.”

Maddie suddenly feels a weight pressing her down into the bed. Working her hands from underneath the sheet she slips a band of hair in her mouth she begins chewing on absently.

Watching this Ella stops fussing with her hair, letting it fall half-tied, before bending closer to Maddie to make eye contact again. “You know what? I know they’d love to see some of your drawings. And I’ll be there. Why don’t we draw together, all right? You and me?”

“And Lewis?”

“Of course! He’ll be there too. I know he’ll love that.”

This time Maddie feels the soft caress of Auntie’s hands on her cheek and is surprised to feel there the momentary coolness of a tear being wiped away.

“It’s almost Line Up. Why don’t you get ready and I’ll meet you after lunch to bring you to the meeting? Make sure you eat enough today. I want you to be at your best, okay?”

She nods as Ella rises and walks to the door tying up the rest of her hair into its tight director bun, but instead of watching her walk out, Maddie turns and loses herself in the montage of house drawings covering the vent.

Before the scheduled meeting, Maddie grabs a backpack from the shared wardrobe, hoping it’s big enough for all her needs. She rolls up the extra blanket and

flattens it at the bottom of the pack to leave as much room as she can. The front zippered pocket she stuffs with all the extra food and snacks she tucked away during breakfast and lunch, enough she figures to last a couple of days at least, along with the additional balls of yarn and flashlight batteries she managed to slip away with. She notates the placement of the wall vent on the map she has blocked out in her small notebook before returning it to her back pocket for quick access. Zipping and hefting the growing weight on her back, Maddie decides that if asked she'll just tell her teachers that the pack is filled with art supplies for her special meeting with the director and Lewis today. To her surprise, no one asks about the pack, and no one stops to ask what she is doing as she looks into every open or unlocked room for other vents to add to her map.

Although Ella said she would come fetch Maddie for the meeting, Maddie instead decides to go straight to her office and wait for her there. And to show how much of a corner she has turned in being good, she has even changed into the prettiest outfit she could assemble out of the assorted shared clothes now filling the drawer.

She sits down erect and formal in the waiting chair outside the Director's office, in her hands a couple of drawings Lewis had specifically liked that she hopes the new people will like as well. She looks at the hall clock, noticing she is a whole fifteen minutes early.

"Can I help you with something sweetie?" a voice asks, and Maddie sees Julia, the Executive Director Assistant poking her head out of her office.

Maddie puts on her most pleasant smile: "No thank you. I'm waiting for Aunt—I mean the *Director*. We're having a special art meeting. I brought my drawings."

“Oh, I see that. We’ll she’s in a meeting for a little longer. If you want to go play for a while someone can come fetch you when she is free.”

“That’s okay. I don’t like to play. Playing is for kids. Can I help you with something? I’m good at helping. Most of those are mine.” Maddie proudly points a bulletin board filled with cut-out construction paper star awards for the best-behaved kids of the week. “If I didn’t get in trouble because of Felix they would all be mine.”

The assistant steps out from her office, craning around to look at the hall board. “That is very impressive. Tell you what. How about I do something for you? I’m going to the kitchen for a coffee. Can I bring you back a snack or a drink while you wait?”

Maddie shakes her head happily. “No thank you. I already ate lunch.”

“Well, that’s too bad. I guess if I come back with any cookies, I’ll just have to eat them all myself...”

Maddie thinks about it then suggests enthusiastically, “You can give some to the Executive Director!”

Julia looks at the closed door across from Auntie’s office. “He’s not in the office today.”

Maddie shakes her head, not surprised in the least. “Why does he even have an office since he’s never here and he just makes you and Ella do all the work?”

Julia laughs as she starts down the hall towards the kitchen, “He does work too, just his work that doesn’t always happen here. So, I’m afraid I’ll still need help with those cookies.”

Maddie leans back into the stiff chair, glances at Ella’s closed door, and leans closer to it, just making out the incoherent signs of a conversation inside. Setting down

her drawings, she scrambles to the plant in front of her hidden vent, and just as she gets herself lowered into position behind it for a quick listen, the Executive Director's door across the hall suddenly opens and of all people, Felix Mustard casually steps out, silently closing the door behind him and heading down the hall right past Maddie without even seeing her hidden there.

Her heart jumps and she gets tangled up trying to unwedge herself from behind the planter too quickly. He has disappeared around the corner by the time makes it back to her feet. She races after him, nearly stumbling in the annoying heeled shoes she wishes she hadn't put on for the occasion. She is almost to the kitchen where she sees Julia turned away from her at the coffee machine when the click of a closing door stops her in her tracks. She turns to see the door to the large supply closet with the secret passage that leads into the laundry room.

Taking a breath, she slowly opens the door, slips inside, and quietly closes it behind her. Carefully navigating around a large vacuum that had been knocked over, she rounds the corner to the larger room and almost walks right into Mustard rummaging through a staff locker. Outraged, Maddie blurts out: "What do you think are you doing!?"

Mustard whirls around, slamming the locker closed, his face wide with shock.

"It is you! You are the one who's been stealing from the staff!"

"Jesus! Not you again!" he says, almost relieved. "I'm not stealing anything. See?"

He holds his empty hand out for her to see as if that would convince her, then moves towards, her but she stands her ground.

"I'm not that stupid. You have pockets."

Irritated, he turns out the pockets to his faded orange puff jacket. “See? Now move out of my way. I’m leaving.” Maddie notices his Gladstone's sweatpants don't have pockets.

Above the steady clanging of machines, they hear the opposite door open just out of sight behind the row of lockers, followed by the squeak of a laundry cart.

“Be quiet!” he whispers through gritted teeth as he starts shoving Maddie back towards the storage space.

“You can't keep doing this Felix!”

“My name is Mustard! You got that Maddie? Mustard! And I do whatever I want when I want. Including pounding you if you don't move!” he says through clenched teeth.

“No you won't, Felix! You're not bad, you're just...”

“Shhhhh!!!” Mustard cuts her off, pressing his big hammy hand against her mouth as he pushes her backward. She can barely keep her balance and tries to look over her shoulder to see where the vacuum is so she doesn't trip over it, but she can't turn with his hand holding her face. She can't even talk. All she can do from falling backward is to grab onto his thick, hairless arm and keep her feet moving.

Not knowing how else to stop his pushing Maddie does the only thing she can think of and bites him. She doesn't mean to bite him hard, but just then the vacuum hits her heels, and she tumbles back feeling something come loose in her mouth.

Instead of crashing headlong into the hard vacuum cleaners, mops, and buckets, Maddie finds herself suspended above them, held by Mustard's hand, gushing with blood.

“Dammit, Maddie.” He says grimacing holding her until she’s found her footing. “You bit me,” he says with quiet shock.

Maddie fishes out the small pieces of skin now tasting its metallic bitterness. “Ew! Gross. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to, but you were pushing me, I didn’t want to trip…” She backs away fearful now, realizing how largely he looms over her in the tight space of the closet, how there’s nowhere she can escape out of his reach.

He holds his wounded hand up almost transfixed as a narrow steady line of blood drips from his thumb down along his wrist. Maddie feels even more afraid as the blood begins dotting his filthy padded sleeve. Maddie looks up to face him, fearful of the anger she’s unleashed in him, but to her surprise only sees pain in his face, pain, and fear. His eyes swell with tears, the ruddy freckled skin of his face turns white. She cowers as he moves suddenly, expecting a slap or a hit, but instead he rushes past her, knocking over mops and buckets as he barges out of the supply closet and disappears down the hall.

Maddie leans back, having to catch herself on a shelf, her heart pounding in her chest. She looks down at the spattering of blood spots on the floor reminding her of the dried berry splotches that still stain the courtyard. Taking a spray bottle and some paper towels from the shelf, she cleans the floor then straightens up the mess. When she finally steps back out into the hall, closing the door behind her, she is startled by hearing her name shouted.

“Maddie! There you are!” Julia hurries up to her, taking her hand. “You’re going to be late for the meeting.” Maddie is tugged back down the hall past the Director’s office to the large conference room.

Julia nudges her into a waiting chair, warns her: “You wait right here. Don’t move from this spot until I come back with Director Allensworth who is out looking for you.”

As Julia rushes down the hall, Maddie rocks her feet back and forth looking at closed shades obscuring the conference room’s floor-to-ceiling windows. Once Julia has disappeared from view, Maddie springs to her feet and walks up to the glass. Placing her hands and face against it, she slides along it to the end where a gap between the shade and window’s edge lets her see narrowly inside, where she spies Lewis at the conference table with two other adults she doesn’t know, watching the large TV in the AV cabinet against the far end of the room.

From what Maddie can see, they are watching a video of what looks like doctors and nurses looking and reaching for something under a bed. Finally, they stand and lift the bed revealing a hoarded collection of bundled bedding and pillows, loose and boxed foods, water bottles, canned drinks, clothes, and various other things lying, and nestled at the heart of the pile a crying little girl possibly half Maddie’s age. Someone fast-forwards the video, as they seem to talk about it, but their voices are too faint to make out. The image settles on a kitchen cabinet where more food, clothing, and goods had been stored, surrounding a small, bedded nest. The video changes to a grown-up struggling to pull the little girl out of a cabinet under a sink.

The girl looks strangely like Maddie with similar curly red hair and complexion, who could almost be mistaken as a younger sister. She can hear the girl’s screams from the video, even through the glass, and feels sorry for her, wanting to help her. She tries adjusting her angle to see if she can get a clearer look at the people on the TV pulling her

out when a hand grabs Maddie's shoulder and whips her around to find the Director scowling at her sternly.

“Where have you been?! What are you doing? Are you spying on them?” She bends down closer to the glass to see from Maddie's point of view. “What have you seen?”

“Nothing. They're just watching TV. I'm sorry Auntie, I didn't mean to be bad. I just wanted to see who was in there.”

The director looks at her exasperated, “Never mind, we don't have time”. She softens suddenly and quickly pats down Maddie's hair. “It's all right. This is just an important meeting, and you're here now. So, I want you to promise me two things: be completely honest about anything you are asked. It's important you tell the truth, not what you think they want to hear.”

Maddie nods while Ella straightens her clothes, excited at the prospect of getting to stay at Gladstone's.

“And second, just call me Ella, or Director Allensworth in there. No Auntie, okay?”

Maddie giggles having expected something bigger. “Okay, Auntie.”

The Director gives her one last stern look before leading her into the conference room.

“Look who I found watching the video from out in the hall,” Ella announces, turning the three of them away from the television at the same time. Lewis fumbles the remote in his hand before pausing the video on the young girl's crying face.

“Maddie, I'd like you to say hi to...is it William?”

The two adults Maddie doesn't know stand to shake her hand. The man shaking her hand first says: "Call me Bill. It's very nice to meet you, Maddie." His short-cropped hair is as silver as Ella's and blends seamlessly into his short gray beard reminding her of the weird magnetic toy she came across in one of the community toy bins years ago, with a magnetic wand she can imagine using it to move his short hair around. She smiles and takes the hand of the next short-haired person.

"My name is Karla. So great to finally meet you. We've heard so much about you."

Maddie yanks her hand away and freezes, her skin going cold. From the window, she assumed both of them to be men. But the woman is seemingly close to Julia's age, also with short dark hair, but Hispanic not Asian. Maddie steps backward, clutching her right hand to her chest, feeling her heart pounding against her hand, unconsciously inching towards the door as all the smiles around her quickly turn to concern.

"Maddie? Are you all right honey? You want to sit?" She barely registers Ella's hand on her shoulder as the two strangers loom closer to her.

"No," Maddie says, shaking her shoulder free. "I don't want to be here anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"You're just trying to get rid of me again, aren't you? This is just another trick."

Now Lewis rises to approach her, and she glances back to see if she is close enough to the door to make a run for it. If she can get back to her room she can get to the duct where they'll never find her.

The magnetic-haired man, Bill waves his hands, “Wait, Maddie, do you think this is a placement meeting...?” He looks at Karla, pointing back and forth between them, “That we are here to adopt you?”

Maddie nods angrily, glaring at Lewis for lying to her.

“Oh my gosh!” Karla blurts out, laughing. “No, no. Maddie, we're just here to ask you some questions so we can see how you are doing. I'm a social worker for the county and Dr. Manning—Bill, is a psychiatrist from the Keystone Residential Treatment Center.”

Maddie looks at all four adults standing around her with mixed reactions of concern and amusement. “You're not going to adopt me?”

Bill speaks, his voice overly soft like he is talking to a little kid: “No, sweetie. That's not why we are here, really. Won't you sit down with us? We just would like to talk with you about your feelings if that's okay, so we can get to know you a little better.”

Maddie feels the tension leaving her body and she tries to smile apologetically to everyone but feels too embarrassed to put much effort into it. “Are we still going to draw?”

“Of course we are,” Ella says, reaching for her hand but then instead pulling away to let Lewis lead her to a seat. “Look what we have waiting for you: paper and pencils.”

Aa Maddie slips into the conference chair pulled out for her; it feels way too big, so she pulls herself closer to the table's edge that feels too high for her. Then she notices she is the only one with blank paper and a handful of brand-new colored pencils positioned in front of her. As the visitors return to their seats—Bill a short distance from her, Karla across the table from her—they only have folders in front of them stuffed with

papers while Lewis and Ella just remain standing. Maddie looks up at them expectantly. “Aren’t we going to draw together?”

They look at each other then turn to their guests, for some reason letting Bill answer: “They can certainly join in a bit. We might have to get some more art supplies for them. If you like Maddie, you can go ahead and start. Do you mind if we talk to you though while you draw?”

Maddie shrugs and looks down at the paper in front of her with some disappointment. There are barely enough colors to work with and not a single one of her usual favorites. How she is going to correctly draw another house is completely beyond her. But what else should she draw? She picks up the darkest pencil, a deep purple, and holds the perfectly sharpened tip over the page waiting for something to come into her mind.

Lewis reaches across the table, past Maddie for the TV remote control, saying softly: “How about I turn this off.”

“Let’s leave it on for a minute,” Bill says, finally turning his serious-faced attention from Maddie to the television set. “Maddie, you were watching through the window over there,” he says questioningly, “You saw some of the video, I guess. Could you share with us what you saw and how it made you feel?”

Maddie is relieved to pull her attention away from the disagreeably blank paper to look at the little girl’s crying face still frozen on the screen.

“I don’t know. She looks really sad.”

Bill nods. “Yes, she certainly does. Maybe a little scared too? Do you recognize her?”

Maddie considers the face a moment then shakes her head no as the paper calls out to her. She swaps out the Purple for the Aqua.

“Are you sure?”

“Does she go to Gladstone's?”

He makes a subtle finger gesture with his hands resting on the table. “Yes, she does.”

Maddie scrunches up her face in thought, doing her best to remember the little girl, or at least look like she is trying to remember because she promised Ella and Lewis she would give this meeting her best effort, even if they are not drawing with her. But she doesn't recognize the girl from any of the little kids she's seen around recently, or ever for that matter. She would have remembered someone who looked like they could be her younger sister. Maybe she just came for a day or two and Maddie never really even saw her, which happens often.

“Would you be okay with us rewinding the video a little?”

Maddie shrugs and turns the blank paper sideways thinking maybe she'll draw water because of the color she's stuck with.

Having not drawn water before she starts with a wiggly line bisecting the page.

The video squiggles until Bill tells Lewis to stop on the still image of the girl under the bed in the bright white room, lined with cabinets and drawers built into the walls.

Bill asks in his careful serious voice again, “Maddie, do you recognize this picture?”

She shakes her head again. “It's not Gladstone's.”

“No, it’s not.”

He keeps looking at her for her to say something else, so she just says: “It’s not one of the foster homes I went to.”

He looks back at the screen, relieving her of the intense look that is starting to feel heavy and annoying. “You don’t recognize anything in this picture. How about the next one? Lewis, would you scrub forward to the next part?”

The video scrambles until it is back on the cabinet. “Okay, play it from here, but muted.”

Seeing the repeat of the video she gets bored and returns to the water squiggle with renewed effort, layering in more squiggles.

“Nothing yet? How about this place?”

The water is coming along, but it's going to take a lot of effort to fill in the entire bottom portion of the page and now she wishes she had put the starting line closer to the bottom.

“Maddie?” It’s Lewis now looking at her expectantly. She glances from him to the TV where the little girl is in a bedroom with a huge mess of clothes, toys, small furniture, and a mattress pushed up against a door. Something about it feels familiar—the colors: yellow mattress, green curtains, pink walls. Maddie sits up excitedly feeling she can finally give them what they seem to be looking for.

“I remember that room. I fostered there once before, didn’t I?” She looks to Ella and Lewis, seeing the confirmation in their expressions. “Is that where the girl is living now?”

“Okay, I think that’s enough for now. You can turn it off now, Lewis. Thank you.”

Maddie looks to Lewis unsure if she said something good or something bad now that they are suddenly turning it off.

Bill leans in towards her taking a closer look at her drawing making Maddie suddenly self-conscious about it. “What are you starting to draw there?”

“Water. I guess.”

Karla asks with a smile: “You guess?”

“I mean, it’s all I can think to draw with this color. But I’m not sure if I’m doing it right.”

“It looks like water to me,” Carla reassures her.

Bill fishes through one of his folders. “Maddie, could you look at these drawings for me.” He slips out a couple of the old drawings Lewis had removed from the art room wall. She feels irritated he has them and wonders if Lewis gave them to him to keep.

“What do you remember about making these drawings? Or let me begin by asking if you remember drawing them.”

Maddie firmly shakes her head no. “I don’t even like them.”

Bill spreads them out on the table for everyone to see, which makes her feel even more irritated and embarrassed. “Why not?”

“Because they are stupid. They don’t even make any sense. They’re just bad drawings. I’m a much better artist now.” She goes back to work at the water, working harder and faster to color it in.

“Yes, you are a very talented artist Maddie. Even these old drawings are very good for the age you were. In fact, they are very sophisticated and interesting. They suggest either a wonderful imagination or a very special way of looking at the world around you or maybe even memories from your past. Would you do me—*us*--a big favor and just look at these drawings for a minute. You can even pretend they are not your drawings if you like. Just look at them and see if they make you think about anything. Anything at all.”

Getting tired of the back-and-forth between trying to draw and answering all their questions, Maddie remembers it's important she pay attention and do the best she can. She sets down the pencil and leans into the drawings as he slides one over to her, peering at it just as he had peered at hers: Boxes. Lots of connected boxes. And a little person inside one of them. And something else next to the person, but the drawing is so bad Maddie can't even imagine what the squiggle is supposed to be. She pulls the drawing closer to herself and tries harder to make sense of it, really tries, not just faking it. But nothing comes out of it no matter how long she stares at it, so she settles back fearful she is letting them down.

“Nothing?”, he asks, making her feel more clearly a failure.

“I'm sorry.” She looks down at her hands in her lap.

“It's okay sweetheart,” Lewis chimes in, resting his hand on her shoulder. “You are doing great. It's okay if nothing comes to you. Your honest answers are all we are looking for.”

Maddie wants to feel more at ease and turns to look at Auntie who is still just standing near the door with her back against the wall, so quiet and seemingly far away.

“That’s absolutely correct. There are no right or wrong answers here. Just honest feelings.” He reaches for the drawing in front of Maddie and pulls it back towards himself, turning it around sideways. “I’ve been looking at these particular drawings for a little while Maddie and I have some ideas I’d like to fly by you to see what you think about them.” He removes from one of the folders two large black and white photographs. “You’ll probably recognize these pictures are of one of the same places in the video. It’s a clinic where I work.”

He pushes the picture close to Maddie, scooting closer as he does so. Even Karla leans in across from her.

Maddie does recognize the picture of the bright cabinet room from the video and in the foreground, cropped partly out of the photo, a heavy-set man with longish dark hair and beard sitting in a chair talking to the little girl seated across from him. Maddie’s eyes light up and as she nearly pops out of her seat with recognition, they all jump around her too.

“What is it, Maddie?” This time it is Ella coming to Maddie’s side, resting her caring hands on both her shoulders.

“It’s him,” Maddie shouts out, hoping she finally was getting what they wanted by pointing out Bill as the seated man in the photo.

“Good eye, Maddie. Very astute observation given how differently I look in that photo.” This time he has the impression of embarrassment and Maddie allows herself to smile with him. “I have far less weight and hair than I used to.”

“You have the same ears.” Maddie offers. “And same ring. But I could tell it’s you anyway. You don’t look *that* different.”

She feels everyone lean around her to scrutinize the ears in the photo then they all turn to examine Bill's actual ears.

“Do you recognize anything else through Maddie? Anything?”

She pulls away from the photo and sinks back in her chair feeling like she is being set up to fail again. The room falls silent with what she can only imagine is disappointment. She starts to feel angry with herself, then with this whole stupid meeting. She picks up the aqua pencil, but she doesn't want to draw now and instead puts it in her mouth and bites down on it, feeling the gratifying indentation give way to the flavor of paint and wood.

“What about this photo Maddie? Does this make you think of anything?” He slides the second photo in front of her, but Maddie just sinks further back in her seat focused now on grinding her way to the pencil's hard, waxy center.

Lewis interjects: “I think this might be a good point to stop. What do you say Maddie: want to take a break?”

Bill breaks the silence: “So, hear out my idea Maddie and tell me what you think: When you look at these two photos—one of the rooms here with all of these cabinets along the walls, and then this second photo, of a pill tray do you recognize or notice anything about these?”

Maddie glances at the second photo of a compartmentalized plastic tray filled with small colored pills that looked like candy, but instead of looking at anything else she just wants to hide underneath the table out of everyone's sight, letting them talk about whatever they wanted. She even stretches out her legs to see how easy it would be to just slip right out of her chair.

Lewis interjects again: “Really, I’m not sure this is the best approach right now.”

Bill glances sharply at Lewis but continues, pushing forward one of Maddie’s drawings between the two photos: “What I notice is that all these boxes surrounding the figure in your drawings reminds me of these boxes in the photos—the cabinets here and here, the pillbox. Maddie? Maddie, are you listening?”

Without meaning it Maddie effortlessly glides out of her seat, right underneath the table. Just like inside the duct, she enters a safe and hidden world, free of faces and eyes, talk about drawings or photos, families, or foster homes. Down here, the talk goes over her in another dimension just on the other side of the tabletop. Down here these people she knows so well and those she doesn’t, become the same: disembodied shoes, socks, feet, and legs.

Ella’s feet approach the table, next to Maddie’s empty seat. “I think Lewis is right. This is a good place to pause the meeting.” Her sideways head appears under the table. “Maddie, do you want to go play outside?”

Maddie scrapes her finger across the tightly weaved carpeting, leaving behind squiggly lines. “Can I play here?”

“No honey. Why don’t you go out to the courtyard so the four of us can finish talking?” Reaching down, she takes Maddie’s hand and helps her out from the table. Maddie finds Karla putting the papers back in their files, while Bill sits back in his chair, his arms crossed, his face locked in an even more serious expression of thought or disappointment Maddie can’t tell. As Lewis walks Maddie to the door she suddenly remembers and turns back to face them: “Thank you. It was very nice to meet you both.”

They thank her in return and Maddie is relieved not only did she remember her manners, but she did it before they did. When the door closes behind her and their voices resume, louder in tone than they had been with her, she heads down the hall hoping she is going the right way, her eyes locked down, counting plank after plank of the hardwood floor as they glide past her field of view. She hopes she did well, but now she can't remember. She can't tell if she did good or not. Although they said goodbye to her with warm smiles, they didn't seem happy to her. Was she bad without knowing it again?

Luckily, she arrives at the courtyard door. Outside, kids are still at play for recess, their shouting voices muffled behind the glass. Her destination unoccupied, Maddie pushes past the door, eyes to the ground, focused on the passing of the left-over tree debris, and a random pattern of black round stains peppering the cracked cement. Kids whiz past her, but because she doesn't look up at them, they can no more see her than she them. She convinces herself she is invisible and makes it to the tree stump uninterrupted.

She rests her hands on the familiar ridged bark that is at once rough and smooth, then glides her fingers along the perfectly cut face, spiraling her finger along the concentric rings towards its center, to where she was told, the tree was once a baby. She begins to think of the flat circular surface like a clock face going backward in time, but the activity of kids running to the window distracts her.

She looks up to see the two policemen clearly visible in one of the hall windows, escorting someone between them, but the occluding wall of gawking kids prevents her from seeing who. The first person who comes to mind is Felix! He finally did it, after all their warnings he got arrested and is going back to Juvenile Hall for the last time before becoming an adult, then it's just jail after that. Maddie should feel relieved, but instead

she feels awful, almost sick and she turns away from the sight, collapsing atop a large, angled wedge of cement at the base of the trunk, leaning on it for support.

Maddie is crying, she wipes her eyes wondering why she is sad because this isn't her fault. She was good and he was bad, and this is what happens to bad people. They are sent away. But it doesn't feel right at all. He isn't bad, just troubled. Maddie knows that now, maybe she's always known that. It's not his fault that he is angry or afraid. He's been sent to foster homes as many times as she, and just like her, he is always sent back, unwanted, not good enough. Gladstone's is all he has left, and even if he can only stay another year until he ages out, he should get to stay. Maddie needs him to stay.

Now angry, she leaps up on the trunk to see over the heads of the kids lined up against the windows, just in time to see two burly policemen disappear from view, not escorting Felix, or any other kid, but Luis the janitor. Leaping from the stump, she rushes towards the window, shouldering her way past kids bigger than herself. But by the time she makes it to the window, all three have vanished around the corner on their way out the front entry.

The crowd of kids pulls Maddie along as they flock towards the gated, street-facing side of the courtyard, where after the sound of closing car doors and the start of the engine, the police car pulls out of the driveway, passing the narrow gaps in the hedges, where they can just barely see Luis cowering in the backseat.

The courtyard door slams open, and Maddie turns to see Michael running out. "They arrested the Janitor!" he yells out, his face full of excitement. "They found some of the stolen things in his locker. He was the thief!" The wave of delight and fascination that spreads across the crowd makes her angry, furious even.

“He didn’t do it!” she blurts out. “He didn’t steal anything!”

“Yeah, how do you know?” a loud voice rings out and Maddie turns to see Felix Mustard glaring at her. Maddie glares back and watches helplessly as the kids mob around Michael for more details. Maddie storms through them all to the door, to the stairs, to her room.

She sits in the dark, behind the taped paper barrier that separates her from the world going crazy on the outside. She keeps running it through her mind, the word falling first silently from her lips, then as a whisper, then out loud: “...Felix...Felix...Felix...”

She pounds the metal wall with the ball of her fist. “Mustard!” she shouts out, the sound of her punch and scream vibrating down the length of the duct. She noisily scrambles after it, not caring if she is heard. When she gets to the end T-junction, she squeezes herself into the tighter left-end shaft and strains forward with more constricted movement, constantly bumping and rubbing against every side of the duct, slowly, intently making her way to one of the faint patches of light that will lead to Mustard’s room.

She is grateful it is only the second vent, as sore and exhausted as she is by the time she reaches it. The comfort and security of the duct now collapses around her, making her feel trapped and cold. The slatted view into Mustard’s room reveals it is empty. Mustard no doubt still outside somewhere beating up some other kid or stealing more money that he would just blame on some other perfectly good person like Luis. After much struggle and discomfort, Maddie repositions herself to kick furiously at the

vent. She is relieved when it pops out faster than she expected and squirms her way out of the duct into his room.

Picking herself up from the floor she immediately begins rummaging through the stock probationary drawers and desk, through haphazardly stowed clothes, around disorganized, wrinkled, defaced textbooks and schoolwork, among the clutter and disarray of Hunting and Fishing magazines, discarded dirty clothes, and empty soda cans. The room smells like sweaty teenager, exactly the way Mustard does, now that she thinks of it.

“Where are you hiding it?” She asks out loud. “Come on room, show me.” But after kicking through the last of the debris on his floor, she is left frustrated and tired. Dropping down to the floor, she manages to lie in the one spot uncluttered enough for her to stretch out in. She rubs the soreness from the red, duct-bruised regions on her knees, hands, and feet, takes a deep breath, enjoying a last moment of open air before crawling back into the vent empty-handed. She looks straight up, and except for the narrow window running along the top edge of the wall giving a slim glimpse of the street outside, she stares at the same high painted cement ceiling, crisscrossed with the same pipes, conduits, and sprinklers as her room, realizing he goes to bed every night seeing exactly the same sight as her.

Movement catches her eye, a fluttering strip of fabric dangling from beneath the bottom bunk. It’s closer to the floor than Maddie’s proper staff bed, but still high enough for her to slip underneath. The mattress fabric sags from the weight of something resting inside it. Inching closer to the bunk, she reaches underneath it, feeling along the bottom,

until she feels the ripped hole. Then fishing around inside the small opening she pulls out a crumpled \$20 bill. She reaches in again and pulls out more and more of them.

“Yes!” she says out loud. “Thank you, bed! I knew he was the one stealing. You are so busted now, *Mustard*.” Pushing herself further under the bed, she pushes her hand in deeper to fish out the remaining bills until she comes across a small, folded photograph, beat up and creased as though it had been tucked away inside a pocket for years and years. She has to angle it to get enough light from the shadow of the bed, to make out the freckled curly, mop-headed kid standing next to who can only be his dad. There is no mistaking Felix Mustard, probably her age now, maybe before he even set foot at Gladstone's. He is small, wiry, more even than Michael Winters, and seeing him next to the imposing, heavy frame of his dad, in worn overalls, thick black boots, and bright orange puff jacket that makes the man look even bigger, Maddie clearly sees now Mustard's physical trajectory, like the leaning tree that will either fall over or get cut down, if not corrected in time.

She just stares at the money and picture inches from her face, then slowly she pushes it all back into the torn mattress. She lies still, feeling tired but at ease in the dark space beneath the bunk. She sighs deeply, trying to gain the energy for her constricted climb back through the duct.

Suddenly the door opens, startling her, and she can just make out Mustard feet standing at the open doorway.

“Screw you!” He shouts, sending Maddie's heart thundering into her ears.

Another kid's voice responds from somewhere out in the hall: “I'm telling, Mustard!”

“You go ahead and do that, and I’ll hurt you even worse you little runt! Come back here and do that. I dare you!”

Frozen with panic, Maddie realizes he hasn’t seen her yet. He’s still in the hall, turned to whoever he is arguing with. With a slick of cold fear radiating all across her skin, Maddie slowly, quietly, inches herself away from the edge until she is entirely wedged against the wall.

“That’s what I thought, you pussy!!” Mustard bellows out loudly to the retreating voice before finally entering the room and slamming the door closed behind him.

He swears inaudibly to himself as his large dirty high-tops march straight to the bed and with a crash he collapses atop the bottom bunk, pinning Maddie beneath the pressing weight of springs and fabric. The pressure is enough to keep her from shaking, but she has to twist her head to create enough space to breathe. Next thing his fat hand comes into view, probing along the underside of the mattress, reaching straight for Maddie. All she can do to keep from screaming is close her eyes and hold her breath and hope in the darkness she’ll fall way into the secret dark dimension lying hidden at the heart of the duct. She hears the sound of rubbing and tugging against the fabric and she slowly opens her eyes to see him pulling the money from the hole.

Maddie feels a miraculous relief once his hand pulls out of sight, but she remains frozen, too afraid to even breath as Mustard sits suspended above her, breathing loudly, muttering half-coherent obscenities. The mattress squeaks slightly as his weight shifts to one side and his right leg rises from the floor, giving her an inch more space to take in a deep breath. And then the horrible sound reverberates through the mattress, physically sinking into her trapped and helpless body—the most disgusting boy fart she’s ever

heard. And she breathed it right in! She manages to pull a loose hand to her face, covering her mouth as much out of disgust as to prevent herself from screaming. The bed shifts under his weight again, falling harder into her almost as a final insult before mercifully releasing as he rises to his feet.

Unable to help herself, she curls into a tight ball, her entire body awash in cold fear, desperately needing a gasp for air that Maddie refuses to give it. She watches his feet stomp across floor clothes and clutter like they weren't even there, and then they stop in front of the open duct and wall vent lying next to it on the floor. His foot kicks at the vent before his hands come into view as he clumsily and ineffectually tries to put it back into place. Finally, he just throws it back on the ground and turns to the bedroom dresser, rocking it back and forth nudging it almost entirely out of Maddie's view. The sounds of drawers opening, then one of Mustard's feet rises out of view, followed by the second. The drawer rocks once, twice, three times, and then it falls still, and the room silent except for the ever-present hum of the duct and distant outside sounds coming from the window.

Maddie slowly lets herself breathe with deep controlled breaths. She lets her tight, aching body slowly relax, and the fear evaporates from her skin like fleeing ants. Then, as slow, and quiet as she can, she nudges herself to the edge of the bed, stopping short of the light-dark boundary of the bed's shadow. From her view now she sees the drawer repositioned a few feet down the length of the wall, each drawer opened wider than the one above, like stair steps. Still no sound or movement, Maddie inches further out until she sees the top of the dresser positioned right beneath the now open narrow street-level window.

With a sudden feeling of determination, Maddie frees herself from the horrid fart death trap, goes straight for the door, then stops, turns, and walks to the dresser instead. Testing its stability, she climbs straight up it without the slightest hesitation or stumble, to its very top and sticks her head out the narrow window to the world outside.

The outside breeze hits her, smelling of damp street, exhaust, dirt, and the hedgerow flowers that line the outside walls of Gladstone's. She looks up and down the street but doesn't see Mustard anywhere. Even running he shouldn't have been able to disappear from view that quickly. Then a noise catches her attention, and she cranes her head upwards just in time to catch a cascade of dirt and debris hitting her full in her face, as Mustard ascends the ivy-covered wall to the window right above his own.

Maddie ducks back inside, wiping the dirt off her head, hoping he didn't see her. But as she hears the sound of the window opening above her, followed by a thump on the ceiling above, she guesses he doesn't have the foggiest idea he is there. With his muffled footfalls sounding against the ceiling above her, she pushes herself fully out the window, stand up amongst the dirt and shrubs and studies the wall, seeing just how Mustard made his way ups: another gutter, not so different Maddie's her rooftop escapes, runs straight up the height of the wall, skirting the ledges that line the base of each floor. Determined, she reaches up and begins her ascent, easily finding the subtle toeholds in the old, uneven brickwork.

She struggles momentarily at the ledge, barely having enough arm strength left to pull herself up to it, but finally manages to bring herself to a sitting position on the ledge just beside the large open window. She sits there motionless for a moment catching her breath and preparing herself. She doesn't know why her heart is beating so much, or why

she suddenly feels so nervous. The climb is not so high, but then she realizes she never really looked down before, always staying focused on where she was going, not where she came from. Even though she is just a story high, she can imagine how much the fall could hurt, and she thinks she finally understands Ella's concerns for her.

But she is not going to fall. She's come too far for that. And she's not going to chicken out or climb back down without doing what she needs to do. She is here for a reason, and she won't stop until she is done.

Inching along the ledge, with her back pressed tight against the wall, she keeps her sight set straight ahead, realizing how visible she is to anyone across the street. Fortunately, she only sees a few parked cars, but the dark-obscured windows of the building across the street seems to glare at her with its dozens of unblinking eyes. Undeterred, she manages to slide to the open window, feeling its frame pressed against her back, and gripping its edge, she leans into it and swings herself around to look inside.

To her surprise, she doesn't recognize it. Not at first. It's small and bare, nothing in it but a small table flanked by a couple of office chairs. Generic posters adorn the walls, but no sign of Mustard and nowhere to hide. She looks up, thinking maybe he had climbed into the window above, but she hears a nearby noise and leans in further to see a door just out of view.

Relieved, she lowers herself inside, using the small table pressed against the wall as a landing. As she quietly slips to the partly opened door, she peers through the narrow gap to find a larger room she doesn't recognize, and she wonders how it could be possible she doesn't know either of them after all her time at Gladstone's.

The lights are off in both rooms, the only illumination spilling from the open window behind her. The larger room is darker, but she hears the sounds of rummaging, the opening of drawers, and can begin to make out the shapes of filing cabinets, bookshelves, cabinets, a large desk in the center of the room, faced by two guest chairs. Then she recognizes the room she has only seen once before: the often locked and empty Executive Director's office, with its tiny adjacent meeting room.

Now her heart is really pounding, but it's not from fear this time, but rage!

She pushes the door wide open and steps boldly into the room, the light from the window behind her suddenly brightening the office and stretching her blurry shadow across the opposite wall. It was not her intention to push the door so hard, but when it slams against the wall she is not nearly as surprised as Mustard who leaps up from behind the desk in such shock that he stumbles and falls right down on his butt. Maddie almost wants to laugh, but instead she throws her hands to her hips and digs in with her most serious scowl: "Stop right now, Felix Mustard!! I'm not going to let you do this anymore!"

"What the Hell?!" It must take him a moment to make her out as he squints against the light from the window behind her, but as soon as he does, he is on his feet racing towards her.

"Stop Felix! Stop right now—!" She sees from his speed that he is not going to stop. She sees from his face he is going to hurt her and now the fear is real, coming out of every pore of her skin, slowing down time so Felix's enraged face seems to hang there frozen for a brief moment until he is on her, his giant hands clawing into her shoulders, shoving her backward until she feels the painful impact of the conference room door

frame slamming against her spine and back of her head. Mustard towers so high over her it hurts just to look up into his dark eyes, and she feels herself being pushed down by his crushing weight, the sharp edge of the door frame cutting higher and higher into her back.

“NO. *You* stop!” He spits at her through clenched teeth, his voice straining to stay low. “This is it for *you*. I’ve had enough of your crap! I don’t care if you’re a girl or just a little kid...”

“I’m...not...a...kid...” Maddie strains to speak, squirming against his grip not to escape so much to try to shift away from the excruciating line of pain cutting into her spine.

“The Hell you aren’t Maddie! You a stupid, dumb kid even more screwed up than me and you don’t even know it. No one wants you because you’re worthless, Maddie! That’s why you’ll never get adopted, you’ll never get a family or home, because you’re a worthless freak!”

Maddie’s vision blurs, flooded with tears of pain and anger, and she starts stomping as hard as she can on Mustard’s boots with her bare feet, sinking lower with each stomp, the pain rising higher now between her shoulder blades and the base of her neck. Words begin pouring out of her mouth: “I don’t care! (stomp) I don’t (stomp) care (stomp) about (stomp) that. I don’t want (stomp) a stupid home, (stomp) a stupid family! (stomp) I don’t want to leave! I don’t want you to leave!”

All of her strength suddenly leaves her: she loses the will to stomp, to resist, the pain at her back softens from sharp to dull as the weight eases off of her, and her shoulders turn cold as his stabbing fingers loosen around her shoulders. She finds herself

precariously balanced against the doorframe, her feet standing atop his unyielding boots, and Felix staring down at her in a moment of confusion. Then the pain of his gripping hands resumes.

“I don’t care what you want. I don’t care what anyone wants. I’m getting the hell out of here, away from these people, this place. And most of all, from your craziness, Maddie!” His grip changes and now he is lifting Maddie to her feet. “You are the worst thing about this whole place, you know that? Coming back here after each bogus family placement, being treated like crap, being yelled at, hit, punished, lied to, told to be this, told to be that, and after all of that being sent back here to this dump just to see your sorry ass still here, time and time again? I mean what is your problem, Maddie? I get why no one wants me. But you must be super screwed up to keep ending up back here.”

Maddie doesn’t even realize when he stops talking, his words echoing painfully, endlessly around her head like she’s back in the duct. The words cut into her, chipping away pieces of her like the chainsaws cut away her mulberry tree limb by limb, section by section until there was nothing left but a tombstone of a trunk.

“Well, say something you stupid freak. C’mon, scream at me, get angry just cry like the dumb little girl you are.”

The words swirl around her like water, the floor no longer beneath her feet, her numb body drifting and bobbing helplessly.

“Say something or I swear I’m going hit you harder than I’ve ever hit anyone else here.”

Maddie says the only thing she can: “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Not good enough.” His fist pulls back, and Maddie closes her eyes hoping not seeing it will make it hurt less.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.”

The soft, grizzled voice comes out so softly Maddie doesn’t know if it came from her mind, like a sudden random memory replaying in her ears, or if a tv or radio had been left on in the Director’s office. Only instead of feeling the punch, she feels Mustard suddenly drop her as he screams out a second time: “What the HELL!?”

Maddie catches herself against the door frame and opens her eye to see Mustard falling to the floor again. To her disbelief, just a few feet away from them, directly between them and the closed main door, stands a man, an old man. Not the Director, no doubt about that. Not Lewis, not even staff; no one at Gladstone’s was *that* old.

Mustard pulls himself up against the door frame now standing at Maddie’s side. “Who-who are you? How did you get in here?!” The panic in Mustard’s voice fills the room.

“I understand your curiosity young Felix Mustard, but I haven’t come to answer questions, rather to stop you from hurting Maddie.”

A sudden dog bark startles her and Mustard equally, and only then do they notice the large shaggy dog standing quietly behind the old man.

“Where’d that DOG come from?!” Mustard asks, his panicked voice rings out louder, pitched high like a girl’s. He begins backing into the tiny conference room, but Maddie can’t take her eyes off the two strangers, standing there in the partial light of the Director’s office.

“I’m so sorry if Argus and I startled you, my dear. It was never my intention to visit you like this, but it appeared you were, well, in a bit of a pickle, pickle.”

Although she hears him speaking to her, sees him standing there, right there, just a couple of steps short of being able to reach out and touch them, she can’t seem to accept it. She knows him—knows them: the old man and his dog from the bus stop! The same but not the same. Always seeing them from afar out the window or beyond the gate, they were like a distant dream, pictures in a magazine. But now seeing the reality of them for the first time, makes them almost more unreal, or her mental image of them so very wrong.

The first thing she realizes, he does not look like a wizard at all, but like an old sailor, and his hair isn’t just white, but is like a cascading waterfall scribbled and streaked with hints of grays, yellows, blues, silvers, browns, and reds as though someone had colored it. The soft Santa face she had imagined is instead as etched, gouged, and pitted as the bark of the Mulberry tree, and as pink as the not yet ripe berries Maddie would sometimes eat despite their bitter taste. But strangest of all are the soft grey pupils of his eyes that look as obscured as the window of her old room when Maddie would fog its surface with her breath to render the view outside into beautifully blurred colors, shapes, and lights.

A pounding at the door startles Maddie back into the danger of the moment and she turns to see Mustard already clamoring back out the window.

Muffled voices shout through the other side of the door as someone struggles to open it. “Hello? Who’s in there!?”

Maddie takes a step back into the meeting room doorway as the old man remains calmly standing there, while the dog drops to its butt trying to scratch some inaccessible itch.

The noise at the door persists followed with the sound of jangling keys.

“You-you’re not supposed to be in here.” Maddie thinks to say, for some reason not wanting to get him in trouble.

“And neither are you, I take it?” he says smiling.

Maddie shakes her head as she continues backing into the conference room before bumping against the small table by the window. She glances out the window just in time to see Mustard already dropping down the street and racing out of her view. She looks back to see the old man standing at the conference room door, as he slowly closes it.

“I’ll let you see yourself out, Maddie. We can resume our conversation then.” The moment the door clicks closed, she is up on the table, out the window, onto the ledge, and effortlessly gliding down the rain gutter until her feet fall into the soft pack of dirt.

Panic races through her as she tries to sort the impossible jumble of thoughts of what to do next. The voices in the room above carry through the open window and Maddie just dives into the thick curtain of shrubs and ivy hoping she can’t be seen until the room falls quiet above. But she can’t hide here forever. Someone may come outside searching the street any time. She can’t be caught outside of Gladstone’s, not like this, not now! She could leap back into Mustard’s room, but that is likely the first room they’ll check, and she is surely in no shape to go back through the vent. But she doesn’t know how to get back to her room from here, has rarely set foot on this particular side street behind Gladstone’s, and has never set foot outside of Gladstone’s alone! She peers down

the street in the direction Mustard had fled, hoping to see him lurking about or working his way back in through some other hidden entrance.

She doesn't see him anywhere, but notices that at least the direction he fled was away from the high dorm windows so at least there was less risk of her being spotted by other kids. Charged by the same anxious energy, Maddie gives one last glance upward and one brief thought to returning to the Director's office to help the old man in some way. But it won't be him that gets in trouble, but her and Mustard. Maybe his strange presence will buy her the time she needs to get Mustard to come back to his room so they can both avoid the now crazy trouble they are at risk of getting themselves in.

She tears off in the same direction, hugging the hedgerow instead of using the sidewalk to minimize her chances of being spotted from any of the many peering windows above. Dirt flies off her feet and her well-earned callouses guard her against most of the ground's irritants except for some of the larger tree debris that somehow made it down to this side of the building.

As Maddie tears tightly around the corner hoping it will bring Mustard into view, she instead she nearly crashes into the old man, were it not for the perfect timing of the dog leaping up onto her with its large forepaws. Maddie clutches the dog in a strange dance until she feels the old man's firm hand holding her as steady as a tree. She notices the dog's paws, one distinctly colored from the other, while its long, bushy tail wags crazily.

This time Maddie feels as angered as shocked by this impossible re-appearance: "What the Fu—*udge*? What are you doing here?"

“I disturbed you again! Alas, I apologize. It is easy for me to forget how anomalous my presence and appearance must be. Like you, I don’t get out very much.”

No less confused or alarmed by him, Maddie pulls away, dropping the overly happy dog on all fours, as she looks desperately around for Mustard, hoping more than ever he is nearby.

“Please don’t be afraid, child. I assure you I only came because of the threat that disturbed boy posed to you. Don’t go after him, lest he bring you more trouble.”

She takes another step away from him, this time not from fear, but from a determination to figure out what is going on. “How do you even know who I am? Who Felix is? We’ve never even met you! And how did you get into the director’s office? It was locked. And-and how did you even get *down!*”

Virgil smiles, the skin around his mouth, nose, and eyes cracking into a thousand more lines and rings like the cut face of her severed tree. “Yes, questions. You have many questions, and I have many answers, but for the moment we only have time for a few, and since none of the questions you just asked are important at this moment, may I suggest ‘why am I here?’”

Maddie squints at him suspiciously, then looks at the happily panting dog sitting at his side with equal suspicion.

“Fine,” Maddie says with more irritation than she intended, but really, she just wants to get away from the weird old guy now, who clearly is a smelly old hobo like everyone at Gladstone’s called him. “*Why* are you here?”

“To save you, Maddie.”

“Pff. I thought you already did that.”

“To save you from this broken life. Of escaping foster home after foster home, of clinging this place, hiding in its trees, its rooftops, and ducts to find someplace where you truly belong.”

Maddie falls quiet, no longer peering around him for Mustard, or a way back inside. Her muscles begin to slack uselessly, her whole body turning numb like her gums at the dentist to have her cracked enamel repaired from grinding her teeth. She wavers there hoping some breeze won't just blow her over.

“You should know, I've been letting you watch me around these parts for some time now, to help prepare for our introduction by making myself familiar to you again. I had not expected the need to introduce myself so quickly, but given we are here, and the growing risk my presence means to both of us, it is time you know me. My name is Virgil and I have known you longer even than fine people of Gladstone's. They've done all they can to help you, but I think it is my turn to help you now.”

“Wha-what are you talking about? I don't understand what you are saying. I don't even know you...”

“I'm talking about a home, a place that is yours and yours alone, and a life, Maddie, a life of your choosing, and above it all, I can offer you something so few ever find: a true purpose that will give your life meaning and will answer all the questions that keep you from being who you truly are and ever can be.”

“Huh? Are you, you like...my *dad*? Or, uh, grandpa, or something?”

“I would be very proud to call you my...granddaughter”, he says with a grey and yellow and partly toothless smile, “alas we are not family-related, but we are connected by something far greater, far more special, and it is my hope to now share this with you.”

“Share what?”

“A gift.”

“A gift?”

“A gift.”

He extends his hand right in front of Maddie as though offering something she should take from him, while Argus bounds to his feet wagging his tail, staring stupidly at his master’s callused, knotted empty hand.

“Tell Maddie: what do you see?”

Maddie looks from the old man’s upturned palm to his gnarled, most definitely crazy face, and his creepy unblinking obscured eyes staring right through as though she wasn’t even there. Then she gets it: the eyes, the dog. Mustard was right: she is just a stupid girl. He’s clearly blind. Maddie subtly waves a hand in front of him, then waves it more wildly in front of his face without reaction.

“My hand Maddie. Not my eyes. Yes, they no longer see as others do, but it does not mean they do not See. What do I hold in my hand, Maddie? You must see it, surely.”

Maddie looks at his hand held directly in front of her face.

“What are you talking about...?” but then she notices a glint of light in the space below his hand, a second glint as though some nearby piece of glass were reflecting sunlight not on him but in the very air in front of him.

Curious now, the little glint so close, she reaches out but just before she can touch it Argus explodes into a furious rage of barking, and Virgil yanks his hand back turning his attention down the street. Maddie’s eyes remain fixed on his hand and another brief hint of light even as she hears the revving of a car’s rapid approach far down the street.

“Argus, heel,” Virgil says with intent, then turns his attention back to Maddie. “I’m sorry. I should never have approached you here like this. I’ve put far too much at risk, for both of us. I need you to walk with me, Maddie.”

His large, weathered hand rests on her shoulder as he guides her back the way she had come. Just as they round the corner a car horn honks out of view followed by the brief screech of tires and the still growing sound of a car speeding towards them. Maddie tears her attention between the retreating street corner where she expects the car to race around any moment, and the more delicate signs around the old man’s empty hand now held high and outstretched before them as though to keep it out of Maddie’s reach. Virgil is pushing her along so quickly now that she is afraid of falling and has to keep catching herself every time her bare soles scrape against the rough sidewalk.

“But wait—what is it? I thought I saw—ouch—I saw something! Let me look again—ow!—Slow down—We’re going too fast...”

She sees Argus bounding alongside them, still barking aggressively, and suddenly a maroon-colored car tears into view, screeching wildly around the corner then straightening out heading right for them. It’s a small regular car, like the kind the staff often use, that she often sees parked or passing by.

“What is it?” Maddie asks again her voice pitched as she now shares the same frantic feeling of imminence, like a magical door closing before she can even enter it. The car, the old man, the dog: she doesn’t understand any of this—but this gift, this thing that can help her. She wants to know more!

Just then Maddie almost falls to the ground as the old man suddenly stops, gasping, talking out loud to himself or to the dog running circles around them barking.

“How did they know?!”

Surprisingly out of breath herself, Maddie follows his infinitely distant gaze to a man jogging towards them from the opposite direction of the approaching car. Running, not jogging. An intense-looking, heavy-set dark-skinned man.

“Now is the time I must ask you to trust me, Maddie. We have to leave here!” he says, his voice almost shaking as he vainly tries to grab the frenetic dog. “Heel, Argus, Heel!”

“What do you mean?!” Maddie asks, the whole crazy situation and the speed with which it seems to keep changing now almost impossible for her to process. Finding herself now standing so close to where this whole horrible outside adventure began, she shouts angrily at him: “I can’t go anywhere. I have to get back inside before I get into more trouble. I’m not supposed to be out here!”

The car now almost upon them skids to a loud stop as one of the front wheels pops it up on the sidewalk the bottom of the car scraping hard against the curb. The engine is still running as both front doors fly open. Virgil lets go of Maddie as he bends down feebly trying to grip Argus in his fury. Two adults step calmly out of the maroon-colored car, a stocky dark-haired man, maybe Asian looking, and a tall, blond-haired, sharply dressed woman, like a younger version of Director Allensworth.

“Argus, no!” Virgil screams, collapsing to the ground on his hands and knees as the dog tears viciously towards the car, the couple quickly retreating back inside.

Scared suddenly, scared truly for maybe the first time in her life, Maddie drops down to help the old man back to his feet, hoping he isn’t hurt, hoping he isn’t mad, that this isn’t in some way all her fault again for being bad and breaking the rules.

The sound of the other man's pounding feet slows as he approaches them, clearly winded.

"Who are they? What do they want? Are they going to hurt us?"

Virgil looks straight at Maddie this time, his distant eyes as thick with tears as her own.

"I'm sorry Maddie. I've let you down again. Forgive me and no matter what happens from now on, you have to believe in yourself. *BELIEVE!*" With the last word, he grips her as roughly as Mustard had and shoves her with all of his surprising strength straight into Gladstone's shrub-lined brick wall.

All Maddie can do is scream and shut her eyes ahead of the stabbing, crushing impact of the wall slamming against the back of her skull and body.

She feels the grazing tickle and scratch of hedge but then just butterflies like she used to get from swinging, and then the deadening hit of some mysterious pressure against her back that takes her breath away, then more butterflies as something hard smacks her knees and forehead, followed by soft crash against her back, like the cushion of soil from the planter outside Auntie's office, or her soft leather chair stained with her and Mustard's tears.

She feels sick, car sick, dizzy sick, falling but no longer falling, thick ache in her forehead, and sting in her knees. Hearing her breath, her heart racing in her ears, the distant sound of barks and shouting, Maddie realizes she is okay, she must have tumbled, turned in the hedge that maybe softened her impact against the wall before dropping her onto the ground. Her hearing is bad, the sounds of the continuing struggle now foggy,

distant. The hit to her head maybe. Carefully, afraid of the sights of her own injury or blood, she opens her eyes slowly.

The familiar white ceiling hangs shockingly above her face in a strange violating of logic. She honestly doesn't know if she is upside down or if the world has somehow gone inside out. She turns her head to see the open dresser with its stair-stepped drawers, the high narrow window, and just outside of it: the legs of Virgil and two men struggling to pull him away.

She is back inside Gladstone's! Lying on the top bunk somehow back inside Mustard's room! She realizes must have somehow fallen into the top mattress and bounced back up to hit her head and knees against the ceiling. Not knowing how she got there, not having the time to even think about it, she sits up and yells out to the window: "I'm coming Virgil. I'm coming!"

Just as she shifts her weight something in the mattress beneath her springs out and she is falling again, bouncing this time off the second mattress below, Maddie flying two whole feet out of the bed twisting and falling to the floor like a cat. A few torn leaves flutter to the ground as tall bed frame teeters, now bent, both mattresses collapsed and sandwiched at the bottom.

Ignoring the stinging pain in her feet, Maddie clamors atop the dresser, this time becoming entangled with drawer each step by Mustard's torn and tattered shirts, pants, and underwear, nearly causing her to fall twice before kicking her foot straight through the middle drawer to catch herself.

"Virgil," Maddie screams again, realizing their struggling bodies are no longer in view of the window, but the shouting and barking still loudly present. "I'm coming!"

Screaming with sheer frustration she struggles to get out the window as though Mustard's room were trying to stop her, to foil her as he always did. She ignores the pain as she scrapes her shins against the bottom edge of the window frame, ignores the sharp jabs of rocks, twigs, and leaves against her hands and knees as she crawls through the dirt, ignores the pain of the rough street scraping away the callused skin from the bottoms of her feet as she sprints down the street around the corner and past the front of Gladstone's watching the low car scrape and grind against every bump in the road laden with its five cramped passengers, Virgil crushed between the two men in the backseat, and barking Argus chasing after them in unrelenting pursuit, both shrinking further and further into the distance.

Maddie finally stops, has to stop, no longer able to ignore the hurt, no longer able to get enough air in her lungs just to breathe, no longer able to shake off the spinning dizziness that threatens to turn her world upside-down and inside-out again.

"Don't leave me..." Maddie wheezes almost inaudibly after them between her heaving gasps and heaving sobs.

A hand grabs her, startling her so much she screams. She whips around to see Miss DeVries holding her, exasperated.

"What in the world are you doing out here Maddie?"

"The old man!" Maddie begins, her voice shaking, so raspy and dry she can barely get the words out, "They took him! The men took him away. Come! Look!" She futilely pulls at the teacher with barely enough strength to even point at the distant car as the last speck of the dog disappears behind a rise.

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