

and started thinking. She had been in college now for about a semester and had mixed feelings about it all. However, right at that moment she was just trying to think of the best way to answer the question.

"I wish I could paint like my mom." She said and smiled. "My mom can paint like no one else. She could paint a landscape, and you could look at it and feel as if... not only that you're there in the scene she painted, but that you can feel what the landscape is feeling."

She stammered as she realized she wasn't making a whole lot of sense at that moment. "I-I mean, like, it's almost like I know exactly how my mother was feeling when I look at every one of her works." Everyone in the group was quiet for a moment, as they were trying to picture what Kaycee was explaining. "Wow. Well, I think that was the best answer so far." Darnell said, laughing.

The next few days were as hectic as you would imagine. I managed to apologize to every Montgomery I could see, even the ones I didn't know. They all denied my apologies and I eventually realized that it was probably more annoying to them to apologize as I'm pretty sure everyone knew it really had nothing to do with me.

I still felt guilty though. I went through some hard things around that time of course, but one of the worst was the idea that, since my family was messed up, and tended to ruin things, so was I—and it was all my fault that Mrs. Astrid had died, been resuscitated, and was now in a coma with a lot of uncertainty surrounding her future.

Aja managed to set up a meeting with Kaycee and I, and this would be the first real time I had talked to them in a few months. Although I had wished it were under



different circumstances, I was excited to see them, even if it was more of a dimmed excitement.

It was cold. It usually was, but that day it seemed almost like it was personal. Like the weather had to remind us how messed up everything was at that time. I took my shoes off at the door after stepping inside, and I sat down next to Aja and Kaycee.

Kaycee had already been crying, evident by her puffy, red eyes and I immediately felt horrible just seeing her like that.

"Hey Ricky." She said softly and gave me a sad, heavy smile.

"Hey."

"How are you?"

I was not expecting her to ask me that.

"I-uh I'm... I'm okay. How are you?"

She stared at the carpet we were sitting on, and her fingers fidgeted with the strings that poked out of the top layer of it.

"I don't know how to do this, honestly."

She then looked up at Aja, then looked at me and back down.

"I just... I never thought this was-"

Then her voice started to break.

"I didn't realize something like this could actually happen."

It was silent for a while. I looked at Aja.

"We're here for you... We love you, Kaycee. We will do anything, give you anything you need."



She was crying. A consistent flow of tears ran down each eye and forgetting everything else for a moment, I was tearing up just from the emotions in her expression.

Aja put an arm around her and then I did too. We all just held each other for a while, talking about Mrs. Astrid and some of our favorite moments with her.

Something that did help us that winter was the re-emergence of Kaycee's siblings, Amir and Meadow.

I had barely known them before the accident, and I got to know them a lot better over the end of December, and through the entirety of January and February.

I found it very easy to like Amir, very quickly. Kaycee said this was no surprise as this was the effect he had on everyone, but considering the circumstances, I was very surprised.

Meadow was a lot quieter, kind of like her dad, but it was undeniable that she was a Montgomery, and not just because she looked like one. She made music, (creative like her parents), and she was very, very good at it. By the end of the siblings' time in Woodbridge, we collectively convinced and helped Meadow to put some of her music on streaming platforms and encouraged her to keep creating. It was a little weird because she just looked so much like her mother—the curly dark hair dyed blonde at the ends, the shape of her nose and eyes, and her small frame all resembled the Mrs. Astrid we all loved so much.

Similar to the way that Meadow looked like Astrid, something took place in early February that reminded us all of her, and helped us to keep hoping for a recovery.

Astrid's last painting before the accident included a large, purple butterfly in the forefront. Now, this wasn't entirely strange for her to do, but it was pretty uncommon for her to paint an animal or bug, especially one so large.



I have never seen a purple butterfly. Honestly, I've barely ever even seen any butterflies. One random Wednesday though, Kaycee called me after class telling me how she saw a big, purple butterfly and how it followed her for a few steps while she was in the park.

She was ecstatic, the happiest I had heard from her in a year, and I also was shocked at the story she told. She said that it had landed on her finger, and the way she felt when it was near was different than anything else.

"It was like a sign from God, Ricky. No, it was the clearest sign from God I've ever gotten in my life. It was like he was letting me feel her presence again. Not just her in a hospital room, her motionless presence, but like how she used to be."

Those words carried a lot of weight, especially the way they were being said. I felt an unmistakable feeling of hope that had been distant for so long. We talked for a while that day. We talked about Kaycee and how she wished she was as creative as the rest of her family. She told me how out of place she had felt in college and how our car accident made it easier to not return to school. We also talked about me, and my family, this was the hardest part of the conversation because even after everything that had happened that year, I still don't think I was quite ready to face the problems in my own house.

"Soo, Ricky."

I could tell by her tone that this would be a conversation that could either wreck the rest of my day or cause a breakthrough that I never knew I needed.

"Yeaa?" I replied, nervously.

"We've been talking about me this entire phone call Ricky. You realize that, right?"

"Yeaa." I replied, sadly.

I knew where this was going.



"We talk about me a lot. And before you interrupt me, yes, I know there is a lot to talk about with me. But if you're checking on me, I'm alright. But I wanna talk to you."

I was silent for a moment.

"I know you don't wanna talk about your family, but talking to you and Aja about how I feel has been detrimental to my healing."

"Good word."

"Thank you."

We both laughed.

"...Okay. You're right." I took a deep breath. "My family hasn't been okay for a long time."

There was a pause while I tried to collect my thoughts.

"Honestly Kaycee, I think that a lot of it stems from my sister."

"?" "Your sister?"

"Yeah, basically there was supposed to be three kids, not two."

I had an older brother who had already moved away. He didn't talk to us a lot anymore, but my sister had always been a secret.

"Her name was Diana... She was stillborn."

I paused; Kaycee let me pause for as long as I needed to.

"My mom, she... she couldn't really recover from the loss of Diana. She was depressed, I don't think we realized that at the time but looking back it seems obvious. She was really sad, Kaycee."



On the other side of the phone, Kaycee took a deep breath, gathering what I was saying and listening closely.

“My dad eventually got tired of her being sad. I think when he realized that there was nothing that he could ever do to help her get back to who she used to be, something broke in him. He started drinking a lot more and... that just lead to a lot more problems. My brother eventually moved out, and that’s when I started hanging out with you more... I needed a family.”

Kaycee was still silent for a while, as she processed everything I had said.

“Ricky, that’s horrible.”

I looked over at the shoebox full of pictures and postcards that lay under my desk.

“Yeah, I guess it is pretty horrible.”

The next day Kaycee called me again. Now, I know I said ‘day’ but it was actually around 11:30 at night, and Kaycee was telling me about how she was going to paint.

I had never seen Kaycee paint before. She told me once that she tried and it just ‘wasn’t her thing’. I figured that something bad must’ve happened. Yes, I thought it was weird, but that didn’t stop me from sneaking out (which wasn’t hard) to see what she was talking about.

We met up at Juju’s house, and I was surprised to see several cans of spray paint stacked next to Kaycee, who was patiently sitting on the ground near the front door.

I must have looked as confused as I felt because she quickly tried to explain herself.

“I don’t know, Ricky. I just... have a feeling.”

She smiled and the next few hours consisted of her painting, me talking,