

Pikes Peak
Library District
2016 Fiction
Writing Contest
Anthology



PIKES PEAK LIBRARY DISTRICT



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The Teen Fiction Writing Contest is held each year by the Pikes Peak Library District for students in grades 6-12. Each year we challenge them to write a short story in under 2,500 words that begin with the same line. And each year, we have a spectacular group of authors rise to the challenge.

This year, our starting sentence—“The picture on the website had lied,” was chosen by two of our Teen Writing Groups--Scribes & Bards at East Library and the Teen Writing Group at Library 21. From this one line we received 61 completely unique and wonderful stories, ranging from futuristic sci-fi stories of survival to contemporary stories about wrestling with yourself and doing what you know is right, and everything in between.

Our winners were chosen by an excited group of staff members from a variety of locations and positions across the district. Our judges read blind—that is they didn’t know the name of the author of the piece. These judges had the unenviable task of choosing winners from the great submissions we received.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Foundation and the Friends of the Rockrimmon library for the gift allowing us to purchase the prizes for our winners today.

I hope you enjoy the following stories from our winners.

Becca Philipsen
Teen Services Librarian
Pikes Peak Library District

Honorable Mention, Middle School Division:

“Anomaly” by Christen Mayberry

The picture on the website had lied. It lied about everything. It lied to me, it lied to my parents – it lied to the whole world; and it changed my life.

My parents thought it would be fun to move to Mars. You heard right. Mars. They thought that it would be like an adventure, a whole new start. Perhaps I should have questioned their decision, but I didn't.

Maybe it's a little bit odd, but I remember that photo better than anything else. I remember the bright blue sky, and the sugary, cold taste of ice cream as it melted on my tongue, and I even remember stepping onto the shuttle that took us away. That picture though, is implanted in my brain more clearly than anything and everything else. It's always there. Every time I close my eyes, the memory of it greets me.

The brochure's colors were brightest I had ever seen. My mom said that they reminded her of the way colors were before the great collapse of society. Since then, colors haven't lit up like they used to. It's all beige and grey now. People who lived through it always said that it was the end of the world. All the wars and disasters in history wrapped up into one big explosion. Those who lived through it, learned to cling to their lives with everything they had. They taught us to do the same.

So, when the opportunity arrived to go to Mars, my parents were immediately on board. Mom said that going to Mars was like doing our job as citizens to ensure that humanity could live on if planet earth failed us. The picture had her convinced; but then again, it convinced us all.

We boarded the shuttle on a grey day in September. I can still feel the salty sour taste of the purple pill that they made everyone take. Then the lights of the world blinked off, and I felt myself fall to the floor like water being poured out of a cup.

I peel my eyes open, letting them adjust to the blinding lights overhead. What's happening? Where am I? Suddenly the memories all come back in a rush. I sit up, feeling dizzy and slowly pull something, - a breathing mask, off of where it had been covering my mouth and nose. I look around to see rows, and rows of sleeping people in metal beds identical to the one that I'm sitting on. Each person is unique. Each person has been lied to, tricked into this like I have. I stand up unsteadily and slowly weave around the beds, trying not to feel sick, as I think about how many other people must be like this. When I finally make it to the door, I'm beyond relieved to be out of there. Quickly, I scurry away from the room, down a narrow hallway. Where it leads to, I don't know or care. As long as it's away from that room, I'm fine.

I begin thinking about everyone that I lost. My friends, family. Then I think about all of the things that I've lost, too. I realize that everyone else on board this ship have lost at least that much as well. I know some of these people. Some of them know me. They're people too. I've got to help them get out of here. But... how?

The ship lurches, sending me flying and the lights flicker, before promptly shutting off as far as I can see. Oh no. I don't have a clue where I am, I might be surrounded in more sleeping people, and I don't know how long this will last. What's worse, is that the space ship is bumping around like it's in an earthquake, but we're in the middle of space. So if it isn't an earthquake, then what's happening?

I stand up and look around, hoping that I might to pick some of the shapes lurking in the darkness. As expected, I can't. I feel like a little kid, scared of the dark, but I don't care. I need out! I have to run! This is crazy, I don't know where I am, I'm probably the only one awake... so, in the spur of the moment, I decide to bolt. Anywhere is better than here. Before I can move, a crash from the other side of the room stops me. What. Was. That? Is there someone else awake here?

"Hello?" I manage to squeak out, over the pounding of my heart. "Who's there?"

No response.

"Will you at least tell me who you are?" I say, softly, but more confidently this time.

Okay, now I'm starting to feel kind of stupid. What if I'm just talking to the wall and I didn't actually hear any-

"My name," says a low voice, rumbling through the silence of the room as if it's responding to my thoughts, "Is Zander. Your voice sounds familiar. I know you."

"I'm, Seran. Do you happen to be Zander Cossack?" I ask doubtfully. His parents weren't the kind of people who I imagined would try to go to Mars. They were very, reserved.

"Yes. Yes, I am. You're Seran Harper, right? Wait, of course you are. I don't know anyone else by the name of Seran."

At that, I can't help but smile.

"Seran?"

"Yeah?" I hear him stand up.

“I think that we’re the only ones awake.”

“I think you’re right.” My voice wavers, and I hope, for a reason I can’t explain, that Zander didn’t notice.

Just then, the lights flicker a few times. Then, they promptly snap back on. I breathe a sigh of relief as I realize that the shaking has also stopped. Now the ship feels still, even though I know it’s actually moving pretty fast.

When I look up and see Zander for the first time, I can’t help but stare. He’s changed so much since grade school. Now, it’s difficult to find any trace of the tall, quiet, red haired kid who I remember. I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing about me.

I clear my throat, breaking the silence. “So, how have you been?”

“Oh.” He seems caught off guard by the question. “I’ve been good. Yeah, I’m good. How are you doing?”

“I’m good, too.” I smile, but then grow serious. “Zander, I need your help. I’m going to try and wake everyone up.”

“No, Seran. I won’t let you do that. It’s stupid. Once they find out what’s happened, people will go crazy! They’ll tear this ship apart piece by piece. Do you really want to be here when they do? Come with me. We can get off this ship!”

“And go where? We’re in the middle of space.”

“Yes, I know.” He admits, sadly. “But it will be almost impossible to wake everyone up. They’re in hyper-sleep. Also, from what I suspect, the only reason we woke up was from a technology glitch, which won’t happen again! Plus, I’ve studied space ships like these, and the

only way to shut off the gases that are keeping the people asleep would be if we manually overrode the system. That would all take a significant amount of training, by the way.”

“So we can’t do it?”

“Not unless you’ve been trained to pilot one of these.”

“But everyone’ll die!”

“Not if this ship is still planning to go to Mars.”

“Okay. You win. But you still haven’t answered my question. Where will we escape to?”

“We’ll get to Mars separately in emergency escape pods.” I can tell that he literally just decided that from the uncertain look he gives me.

“And you know where these are?”

The look on his face says that he doesn’t.

“Great!” I say, sarcastically. I’m already asking myself why I agreed to this. “How do you propose we find the escape pods?”

“ We’ll figure it out, but we have to go. Now.”

What if we’re moving away from the pods the entire time? I ask myself, shaking my head. He’s obviously made up his mind. I race after him as he darts down the main hall.

“Zander!” I shout, a few minutes later. In this maze of hallways and rooms, I’ve already lost him. “Zan-” I round the last corner that I saw him go around and almost run right into him. He isn’t looking at me, but holds out his arm, to block me from going any farther forward. I look at him, and then look to the spot where his gaze is fixed, and immediately see why he stopped. In

one of the hallways branching off of the one that we're standing in, there are at least ten bodies, laying on the ground, un-moving.

"Are they, dead?" I gulp, dreading his answer.

Zander gives me a sideways glance, as if he's wondering why I would think something like that and quickly replies, "No. Not dead. At least, they aren't dead yet. They've been tranquilized because they must have all been awake, like us. Judging by the mark left by the tranq. gun, that was made by an Aten."

"A, what?"

"A patrol robot, programmed to shoot at any movement that they see. They have incredibly accurate aim, so it's best to avoid them altogether. But, the effects of tranquilizer won't last long. It's going to be back to put them in hyper sleep, soon. If it sees us--"

"It'll shoot!" I interrupt, already knowing what he was going to say.

"Yes." He replies, obviously annoyed at me. "Come on."

I'm about to go when I see a flash of silver out of the corner of my eye. I turn, and see a small robot. "Too late!" I gasp, already running back the direction we came from.

I can hear Zander following me. "We'll never outrun it!" he shouts. I ignore him. It may not have even seen us in the first place.

Then, I hear it. The motor's soft whirring kind of gives its presence away, but I don't dare turn my head to look back.

"Go!" Zander yells. I can hear the fear in his voice and I know I was wrong. It did see us.

Suddenly, I'm pushed into another hallway, probably by him. I stagger forward, gasping for breath. It's too late. I turn around to see that the robot is less than six feet away from us.

"Life forms of your type are not permitted to remain conscious while aboard the Altair." The robot informs us, in a voice that sounds very neutral. So that's what this ship is called. I wonder why I didn't know that before.

"Run." Whispers Zander, shoving me backwards. I stumble to gain hold of my footing.

"Do not. Move." Commands the robot, a moment later. It holds up the tranquilizer gun, warning us.

I look nervously from Zander, (who's staring defiantly at the robot,) to the robot who has its weapon pointed at me, unwavering. Before I know what's happening, Zander kicks the robot, distracting it, and pulls me to the ground as the gun fires at the spot where I was less than thirty seconds ago.

"The gun takes fifteen seconds to recharge, so let's go!" Zander urges. In seconds, we're up and running again.

"This way!" He'll say every once and a while; but I'm too freaked out to talk right now. Part of me wants to burst out laughing, at the shock of us making it, while at the same time, another part of me doesn't like what a close call that was. Imagine what would have happened if we'd been shot! We'd be back where we started, with no technology glitch to save us this time.

A few minutes later, we come face to face with a wall. I turn, giving him a 'see? I told you this wasn't going to work,' look. He ignores me and steps over to a small silver panel that I

hadn't noticed before. After some button pressing and frustrated grunts, he finally finds the right combination, and the wall slides to the side, revealing a hidden chamber.

"What is this?" I ask, hoping that he's not planning on getting us to Mars in this flimsy piece of junk. It's a wonder that it's still clinging to the ship at all. For a moment, I'm positive that it must be some kind of storage closet, even though my gut says that it's not.

"The escape pod." He replies, quietly. "Go on in."

Slowly, and a bit doubtfully, I step into the pod, hoping that this decision won't be the one that gets me killed. After a moment of hesitation, Zander steps in too.

"Where are the buttons?" I ask, doubtfully. This thing had better have manual control options.

"There are none." He sighs, looking straight ahead.

"What?!"

"Do you want to get out? Because you can go ahead. I don't get why you're always complaining. I've saved you like, three times today, and all you do is complain still!"

"**You** saved me?" I look at him in shock. "Okay, fine. If that's what you think, maybe I will leave!"

"Wait!" he cries. It appears that I've shocked him back into reality. "I'm sorry okay? I'm just really stressed out right now. I've kind of had a long day, and I still can't believe that the picture for that add back on earth tricked us into thinking that this is was going to be a luxury ship... they just made it seem so different. So, easy." He's deflating as he speaks.

Before I can respond, the Aten patrol robot round the corner, and pauses, staring at us angrily. As it raises its weapon, we suddenly shoot off the ship in the pod. I look over to my left where Zander is fiddling with some wires, so I guess it leaves it up to me to shut the pod door. I lean out, holding on to the door frame with a death grip.

“Don’t look down!” Yells Zander, obviously sensing my fear. Right, I just have to think about the task at hand. Nothing else. Even though there’s still so much I don’t know about myself, and about what happened in the last twenty-four hours, we’re finally getting to Mars. We’re awake, we’re alive, and we’re one step closer to saving everyone else. Will we be able to save them from whatever lies ahead? I don’t know. But even if we can’t, I’ll remember them all the way I am now, and I don’t easily forget. I latch on to the door, and heave it shut, enclosing us in darkness as we shoot through space.

Third Place, Middle School Division:

“Loss and Change” by Madelyn Prichard

The picture on the Internet had lied in the picture I saw my grandfather as a healthy and smiling person. As I realize this lie, I remember the pain I felt as I walked through the door, having just returned from camp, to find that my grandfather had passed away. The pain was like a knife to my chest, like my heart was being ripped in two. After the pain came the anger, the anger at the picture for being a lie. I wish I could have gone back in time, back in time to the picture I saw, to the time when he was healthy and smiling.

When I remember this, I think about how swift his health declined and how fast he became sick. I think of the agonizing pain he must have felt, the struggle to breath, gasping for air and reaching for someone to pull him out of the water. I try so hard to push these thoughts away, but I am unable to. As I run into my room and slam the door, I reach for the closest object and grab it. All I can think about is getting this rage out, destroying everything around me to get this festering mess to explode. As I reach up to throw it I realize that it is a picture of my grandfather and me. I carefully place it back down on my desk and crawl into my bed and curl up as tiny as I can under the covers. I am hoping desperately that this is all a nightmare. I hope that when I wake up I will be in his arms, his kind, deep voice telling me it will all be all right.

My mother's voice helps to bring me back to life and I soon realize that my reality is now my worst nightmare. I realize that she is calling me to dinner and somehow I find my voice to tell her that I'm not hungry, that my insides feel like a hollow pit. After about five minutes she tries to come into my room, she finds out that the door is locked, that I just want to be alone. I hear her loving voice telling me that it will be all right but all I can think is that it will never be all right again. My grandfather isn't here, he helped me in times like this but now he is gone.

I curl up into a tighter ball, blocking out the sounds of my mother's cries, while trying to hold back my own. I find I am unable to stop the tears from falling. One salty tear falls down my

face, than another, and before I know it a whole downpour of tears. I just can't help it; I can't help the pain as it comes out. Before I know it the exhaustion overcomes me and I am asleep.

I startle awake to realize that I am starving. Pushed my the pain in my heart and my stomach I get out of bed, my face and pillow are wet with tears I kept crying, even after I fell asleep. So I go into the bathroom and wash my face with a washcloth and try to wipe away the remnants of my pain. After I am finished I walk back into my room and put on a plain black t-shirt and some jeans and take some time to put my hair up into a braid. After I finish these tasks I unlock the door and start the trek down the stairs. as I make my way down I smell pancakes, bacon , sausage, and eggs. This helps to wake my mind up from the zombie state it had been in previously. as I start to jog down the stairs, I clutch the railing in hopes of not falling.

When I finish down the stairs I follow the smell of breakfast into the dining room and see everything laid out on the table. As I look around the dining room I remember the time my grandfather told me that this was his favorite meal. Tears once again begin to swell in my eyes. I try to blink them back but it isn't working. As a tear falls down my cheek and onto my feet I quickly scan the room, searching for something to get me out of that room. My eyes land on the vase of flowers in the center of the table and I see they are dying. Another tear falls down my cheek as I ask my mom, in a small voice, if I can replace the flowers. As she looks at me I see the pain in her eyes as she tells me that I can.

I don't dwell on the pain I see for too long because more and more tears are falling from my eyes. So I slide open the door just in time to rush outside as the sobs overtake me. I fall to my knees, trying to wipe my face with my clothes and hands. As I continue to calm myself down I start seeing how beautiful the outdoors are. There is an entire forest just past our backyard that I have failed to notice properly, that I had never bothered to actually see. I usually spent the days

inside doing my schoolwork and helping my grandfather. When I went outside I was usually too engrossed in books or my thoughts to truly take in the beauty around me. The tragedy of losing my grandfather has caused me to open my eyes and look around at everything around me. That's when I remember my grandfather telling me the story of my name, Taiga, and that it is the name of a forest.

All these thoughts are rushing through my head and my mom coming to ask me about picking the flowers startles me. As I'm about to answer her as my eye catches a glimpse of purple and I know that that is the flower I want. I hide my face from her as I tell her that I am about to leave to pick the flowers I'm seeing.

As I'm about to enter the forest I look back at my mom and watch her slowly retreat back into the house to finish breakfast. I can hear the door close as I turn back to the forest and go in search of the purple flower I saw. As I start walking towards the flower I listen to the songs of the birds in the trees, feel the softness of the grass under my feet. It wasn't until this moment that I realized that in my haste to run out of the house I forgot to put my shoes on. I can't bring myself to care though as the grass feels good under my feet.

As my gaze meets the flower, I lean down to pick it I hesitate. I usually wouldn't do this; I would just pick the flower and walk back to the house. This day though, I stop and see the beauty of the flower and I see how it glistens in the light. I notice the color it brings to the foliage around it. This brings my thoughts back to my grandfather. I remember how he was a light who lit up the world around him. He helped bring beauty and color to my family's world. As I'm thinking these thoughts I slowly and gently pluck the flower from its stem and place it in the vase and then I turn and head back home.

After I return to the dining room and my breakfast I look at the flower in the vase, I'm saddened momentarily that I brought it in here. I'm saddened that I took it from its home where it belonged. Once again this brings me to thoughts of my grandfather and how the pneumonia was like me, it took my father from his home, from the place he belonged. Like my grandfather, the flower will soon pass away; it will soon be gone. I find myself thinking of the picture of my grandfather, of his smile and his healthy demeanor. How I wish the pneumonia hadn't ravaged his body and took him from us.

Once again my mother startles me out of my thoughts as she tells me, sadly, that she has something to tell me. I am scared to hear this announcement, the last time she said that to me she told me my grandfather had died. As I tell her I'm listening she proceeds to tell me that with the loss of my grandfather, her father, she feels unable to continue homeschooling me right now. I'm shocked out of my stupor. How am I supposed to go to public school and deal with this terrible loss? I jump up from the table and run up the stairs. As I rush into my room I slam the door and throw myself onto the bed.

I just can't wrap my head around what is happening. It feels like there is too much loss and now changes to deal with. For as long as I can remember my mom has homeschooled me. She, along with my grandfather, has been my source of education. Then it hits me out of the blue, I suddenly realize how hard this must be for my mom as well. Since my grandfather passed away she hasn't been teaching me like she had before. I realize that her grief is as real as mine. Even though I had these thoughts I can't stop thinking that sending me to public school will only make it harder for me.

At some point I must have fallen asleep because my eyes startle open at the sound of my mother knocking on the door. I try to ignore her as I keep staring at the wall, hoping that she

won't notice my puffy, red eyes from crying. I tell her to come in in a small, defeated voice. I listen as the door opens with a squeak; my mom has brought lunch up to me. I hear a clink as she sets the plate on my desk; I still stare at the wall not paying attention. She must sense that I just want to be alone as she quietly makes her way back out of my room. Right before she closes the door I hear her defeated voice tell me that I will be starting school in the morning.

As I continue to lie on my bed, I stare at the food that my mom has brought me. There is a ham and cheese sandwich, neatly cut into four triangles, on one side of the plate and on the other there are chips and fruit. As I stare at the plate I realize that in the chaos of the morning I didn't finish breakfast. So I grab the plate and eat the food that my mom made for me. After I'm done I know my hunger is sated but my mind and heart are still in turmoil. I continue to think of my mom's words, telling me I start school in the morning. How has my life changed so much in such a short time?

As I come down the stairs later that day, I can't help thinking about what my mom is going to make for dinner. I head into the kitchen to ask her if she needs any help but I am stopped by a knock on the door. I rush to open it, expecting one of my mom's friends but instead it is a pizza delivery guy. I'm shocked, it's been a long time since my mom hasn't cooked a meal for us. This is just another reminder of the changes that are happening in our lives.

As we gathered around the table, eating dinner, my thoughts are on the next day. I will walk into a strange environment and try to cope with the surroundings and with the loss of my grandfather. It seems like such a hard task, how will I cope? Will I make friends? What will I do if the change is just too much? With these thoughts stirring in my brain I finish my pizza and head up to bed without saying a word. I have resigned myself to the thought that I'm going to step into a public school for the first time in my education.

When I'm in my room I decide to follow my mom's advice and pick out my clothes for the next day. I decide on my favorite shirt and pants. As I lay them out I set my alarm for seven am and then I crawl under the covers and pray for sleep to come, as I lay there waiting to fall asleep I am overcome with a feeling of peace. It feels like a hug from my grandfather, I suddenly know that everything will be ok. I can hear his voice in my ear telling me that I will be ok, that I will make friends and that I will laugh again. Like a rainbow after a rainstorm, I see hope emerging after this loss. Even though the picture on the internet lied, I know that my grandfather is happy and at peace.

Second Place, Middle School Division:

“The Battle of Feather and Claw” by Liberty Harms

The picture on the website had lied. The bird fight wasn't just a natural fight, it was destiny. And here's how it went...

Aviate flew hard as she soared side to side avoiding rock after rock. The enemy was somehow on top and below her at the same time. The skuas haunted the skies with their menacing shapes. Bird after bird fell from the sky as Aviate's fellow birds were suffocated under the surrounding enemy. The rain fell unceasingly. Aviate swooped over just in time to avoid a falling bird. She barely had enough time to dive as a rock hurtled overhead. Her great feathers ruffled from the force of air that the rock had sent in her direction. Her light feathers held bright stains of the fallen and her oppressors. Her wooden gemstone necklace hung with the bright blue beads across her heaving neck. It wore blood as well. Rocks pelted the sky as the owls and skuas fought claw to claw and beak to beak. There was no end to the mass of madness that surrounded the owls as they were hunted as easy prey. She felt a sharp pain in her left wing that flew through her whole entire feathered body. A skua was pecking fiercely at her wing tip feathers. She flapped her great owl wings madly trying to lose her invader, but the skua just held tightly to the tip of her wing with its beak. Aviate hooted in anguish as she fell downwards from the extra weight that evil thing had added. Another owl dove into the skua and sent it falling downwards. The owl flew up next to Aviate and aided her while saying, "Are you okay, Aviate? That beast had you pretty good." Aviate held back the tears that she so longed to let run and said in a voice that sounded choked, "I'm fine, Red Wing. Where is your brother and troops?" Red Wing hung his head and spoke in a choked whisper, "They are all gone." Aviate's heart seemed to drop deep in her chest as she realized that her fellow birds were gone just like Red Wing's troops, but there was no time for sorrow. The enemy was causing much confusion and madness through the owls' scattered battle lines. Red Wing looked at Aviate then shot through the sky like an arrow that had

been excellently aimed. Aviate fluttered through the sky with her injured wing. She flapped her right wing wildly to stay up in the air at an average height. Below, she saw a scarlet covered ground scattered with the fallen. Those birds would never again have to see the sight of such a gruesome battle. Aviate's wing sent sharp shocks of pain through her bones as she flapped it to keep momentum in the air while her other wing started to tire from the endless flapping to stay above the clouds. If she went any lower, she would be a better target for the rocks and skuas. With no warning, a skua launched itself upon Aviate's back. She flapped in almost a craze at first from the stun. Then she faced her fierce attacker. It was ripping viscously at her back when she took in her surroundings. She fought fiercely against her invader with all claw and beak strength. She and the skua tumbled through the sky toward the ground. Aviate tried to release the tight piercing attachment that the foe had upon her back but to no avail. She and her attacker sprawled across the floor of earth that was softened by other motionless birds. She struggled up to see her assaulter rising with a large crack in its beak. Aviate's glowing eyes of rage met with her opponent's eyes of a mad fire. The two hurtled toward each other only to collide into the other hardly doing any good. The force of the hit caused them both to stagger back grabbing at some sort of joint. Everything in Aviate's sight seemed blurred by a light mist, but she could still see her attacker rising from the muddy ground. All of the puddles were full of crimson and even a forever retired bird. Aviate was now covered in blood of her own and of others but still she pressed on toward her advancing foe. Flight was now an impossible option for the ragged owl and fearsome enemy but that did not stop the fighters. The battle ended with a painful death of the skua. Aviate stood with one of her talons resting upon her fallen foe. She was breathing ragged breaths of air as she embraced the glorious feeling of victory. She had won a fierce battle single clawed against a mighty warrior that had brought many others to their ends. She knew this

because of the many colored feathers of others that decorated his wings. When Aviate had regained her breath, she tried desperately to fly but she could only go as high as a foot in the air. The huge gashes in her exposed back flared with pain while she stood enraged that she, a great snow owl warrior, couldn't fly higher than a foot. She fumed over the matter until she came to a conclusion. If she was stuck on the ground, than she would just have to make use of the situation.

She started to wander around the enemy base trying to find some sort of weakness in the forces. She snuck pass the few guards that had stayed and searched through the giant tents that had only seemed like faded dots from the sky. In one of the very first tents, she spotted a magnificent barrel of blast powder. It sat along with a bunch of other explosives and powders too. She tied a long rope to the barrel and then strung the string around her neck. She then pecked out the cork and watched the black stream of powder spill upon the ground and explosives. She dragged the barrel by the string all around the camp and chuckled wickedly to herself while whispering, "Poor, poor, skuas. They will soon only be a pile of ash and feathers when fire hits this trail." She felt a small bit of sorrow for the unfortunate birds but she simply let the feeling slip away. For years, the owls had been battling the skuas, but to everyone's joy they would soon be demolished. The skuas would forever more be gone and the word "skuas" would only be used for ghost stories.

But as she thought of what joys it would bring, her mind wandered to another area of thought; what would happen to *her*? Since she was unable to fly, she would have no time to escape the dread that she would soon shower upon her enemies. But then she started to think about all of the young owlets that might have to suffer the terrors of war. She herself had longed for the pride of having a family but still searched the many skies of life for her start of one. If she made this sacrifice, then she would never know that pride. She decisively blew out a long breath

of cold air into the brightening dawn. She would do it, and she wouldn't turn back now. She had a new kind of joy in her weary soul. It was one that she felt deep, down in her bosom. She walked on in almost a hurried hop trying to get through every nick and corner of the camp. If this camp was going to blow, then it had to be done right. She only had one more tent to go through before she could light the fuse. It was a dark and terrible looking tent with huge gashes covering the entrance. A dark flag painted with blood showed an evil bird skull. Aviate was sure that this was the tent of the skuas' master.

She cautiously looked around the large tent for any skuas, but she saw none. She stepped into the tent and looked around with terror. She saw skulls of birds, large and small tail feathers, torn tapestries of battles, and skins of feathers of many. She shuttered at the sight of a snow owl's pelt. She had never seen a place nearly as hideous as this in her life. She started to run around so that the powder didn't just stay in a pile. She filled the whole tent with the death sentence that she would soon put into action. The powder ended and she then stepped back to admire her work. She had placed it everywhere except in a little square. She tripped and bumped into something soft and bulky. She spun around to find an enormous bird.

At first Aviate thought that it was a real skua, but then she realized that it was probably fake or stuffed. Its eyes didn't move and it showed no signs of life. Aviate did a fake worried laugh and said carefully, "Oh, it's a fake bird. I knew that. I did." She started to head for one of the many torches that dotted the walls but heard a terrible voice from behind, "Fake bird you said?" Aviate turned to see the skua that she suspected dead or fake standing up straight. She shook uncontrollably and whispered hoarsely, "Pardon sir, I didn't meannnnn." Her voice went dry. When the giant skua turned and cocked its head at her, it had huge blue markings across its young face, small jagged cracks streaked out along its beak, and burning, yellow eyes that

starred into what felt like the inside of you. It gave a light chuckle of delight and then hopped up to Aviate.

Aviate felt as though she was the smallest creature in the universe in front of this massive monster of a skua. He was far bigger than any other skua that Aviate had ever seen. The skua opened its great wings of a wide wingspan. She felt the mighty gust of wind blow past her with such momentum that she nearly toppled over. All of the lights went dim and left just a trail of smoke floating lightly upwards. The only light was a tall metal lamp-like holder that held a fire on the top. The tent was a misty dark and Aviate only saw the wicked shadow of the towering villain. She saw it but was still caught off guard. The opposer had tripped Aviate by his wing and was now standing over her with one of his long talons clawing deeply into Aviate's bosom. She struggled uselessly against the strong assailant that had her trapped under its power. The skua did another light beastly laugh and said in an almost dreadfully kind voice, "I am Blackwing the Ghastly, the Ruler of All the Sky, King of Pain, and the Beast of Murder." Then he edged his face near Aviate's and said in a low whisper, "And I know who you are, Aviate." Aviate's heart seemed to jump when the word "Aviate" fell out of this grim scoundrel. The only word that Aviate could force out came in a breathless whisper, "How?" Again the rascalion skua laughed his light, wicked laugh and said loudly with almost joy, "How? Aviate, I've been watching you for a long time. I have seen you practice your arts of a warrior, look through books of history, and play games of Feather Patch." Then his voice dropped almost too low to understand and said, "Do you know me or my plans?" Aviate's mind rushed yet she didn't know this evil one or his plans. "You do not, fool!" yelled Blackwing, "I am unknown to all and I will forever more be unknown!" Aviate shuttered at the sound of his voice. It seemed to be echoing off of the tent and back again over and over in her mind. Then Blackwing continued in a soft voice with a wild

smile, “Do you know what that means? It means that I can’t let you live. You have ventured into the territory where no one ever returns, where evil lurks, and where terrors find refuge.”

Blackwing’s talon then grabbed and pierced Aviate’s throat causing her to choke and flap wildly at her neck. Blackwing just looked at the terrified creature below him with satisfaction as it clawed harmlessly with her wings at his muscular talon that bound her. He watched as she frantically fought for air and gasped for freedom. He was killing her and had no intention of stopping. Aviate felt her air supply failing and disappearing rapidly from her throat. Her mouth went dry, her feathers were heavy with perspiration, and her wings started to grow weak from the lost air. With one final effort she pushed with all her ability on Blackwing’s talon. She dug her beak ferociously into it with all force. “Ckawaaaa!” screamed Blackwing as he stumbled backwards. With a madness in his eyes, he threw the first thing he caught hold of- the black staff that held fire. He flung it madly at Aviate but missed. The fire fell and hit the blast powder which lit with a quick spark. The fire started to follow the trail of blast powder with a fierce hiss. Aviate scrambled into the anti-powder square while watching the fire she said forcefully, “You have lost, Blackwing! In fact, *you* are the one that has brought doom to yourself!”

Blackwing was surrounded by fire and stood gritting his beak with a fuming anger. He watched the fire travel all around the room burning up the tent’s walls, destroying his horrid décor, and running out the flapping tent door to destroy all of the rest of the camp. Aviate and the snow owls had won. The flames neared Blackwing and started to flare at his talons. The flames sounded almost happy that the great skua lord was going to die in their flames. While the flames climbed his feather Blackwing called out with hatred, “You haven’t won, Aviate! I promise you! You haven’t wonnnnnnn.” Blackwing’s voice trailed off into nothingness as he fell into the flames. Aviate looked up to see the tent’s top fabric burning and demolishing away and allowing

the sunlight to flood what was the tent of evil. There was even a rainbow in the sky above all.

Aviate noticed that hundreds and hundreds of snow owls were flying toward her. Owlets, males, and females were crying, laughing, cheering, and doing tricks in the air. They were free! The snow owls were finally free!

Second Place, Middle School Division:

“Life Guarded” by Sophia Mayhugh

The picture on the website had lied. When I had logged onto our local pool's official site to learn about the Junior Lifeguard program, I'd seen many pictures of teenage lifeguards. Some were smiling, but most had serious, focused expressions on their faces that shone like beams from a lighthouse.

Yet when I stepped through the pool gates, toying nervously with the silver whistle that hung around my neck, I only saw two other people wearing the lifeguard's uniform. One was – gulp – Carly Fisher, the most popular girl at John Keegan Middle School. Standing near her was an older girl with the same big green eyes and dark hair. Neither of the two looked serious *or* focused as they checked their fingernails and giggled together.

What is Carly doing as a Junior Lifeguard? I thought. You see, every year our local pool has a special summer program where middle school kids can train to be lifeguards so they'll be prepared for a job when they get to be in high school. You have to write a ten-page essay about why you'd be the best person for the job as a Junior Lifeguard, and only two kids are selected every summer. Because Carly was usually busy passing notes to her friends and secretly painting her fingernails under her desk during most of the classes we had together last year, I never pictured her as being the essay-writing type.

I attempted to act nonchalant as I walked over to the two girls. The whistles they wore glared in the sun, causing me to blink strangely. "Hey, guys," I squeaked in my high-pitched voice.

One of Carly's perfectly sculpted eyebrows rose. "Oh, hey, Olive. Did you need something?"

I hesitated for a second. "Um, no. I'm just ready to start training as a Junior Lifeguard."

“Oh!” Both eyebrows rose as she finally seemed to notice my uniform. “I didn’t realize you were the other JL.”

“JL?” I asked as a crease formed between my eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“It stands for Junior Lifeguard, Olive.” Carly said as she rolled her eyes. I stared at my toes as a knot formed in my stomach. Something about Carly always made me feel inferior.

“Anyway, let me introduce you to my sister, Jennifer. She’ll be the one training us this week.” Carly said.

Ah-ha! I thought. I had a suspicion that Jennifer must have pulled a few strings to get Carly a position as a Junior Lifeguard.

“Hi,” Jennifer said distractedly. I followed her gaze and saw her eyeballing a teenage boy nearby with blue eyes and a deep tan. Jennifer cleared her throat. “So, um, for now I guess you guys can just watch over the pool. Make sure kids behave and stuff.”

“What? That’s it?” I said, bewildered. “What are the rules? What should we do when the kids disobey? What about - “

Neither girl glanced my way.

Carly noticed the way her older sister was looking at the blue-eyed guy and whispered, “Go get ‘im, Jen. We’ll be right here, waiting.” Jennifer nodded slowly before walking away.

“Wait!” I called after her. “I have questions!”

Carly turned towards me and crossed her arms. “Chill out, Olive. If some dumb kid breaks a rule, we tweet him with our whistle. End of story. Now, come on, let’s go sit on a lifeguard perch.” Carly walked towards one of the wooden chairs the lifeguards always sat in, and her flip-flops snapped on the concrete. Although it was about ninety degrees outside, I stood frozen. Should I follow Carly, or pester Jennifer for some firmer guidelines? I chewed on my lip

as I thought. Jennifer did seem sort of busy, and I doubted I would be able to get an inkling of information while she was with that guy she was interested in. If I sat with Carly I would be able to see more of the pool from the tall perch. Plus, if I was honest with myself, I was eager to hang out with Carly. At school she would never talk to an unpopular nobody like me.

As I headed over to the lifeguard perch nearest to Carly, a sharp fishing hook scraped the inside of my belly. *Shouldn't you be watching out for the kids in the pool?* A little voice screamed at me. *What if one of them were about to drown because the rules weren't enforced? They call you "lifeguards" for a reason. . .*

I shook my head, trying to clear out the voice in my mind. It would be okay. It was just one afternoon, right? I'd get better training tomorrow.

As I scrambled into my mom's car at the end of the day, my mom grinned at me like the Cheshire Cat. "So?" she asked as the cool air conditioning flooded over me. "How did it go? Was it fun? Did you get a lot of training?"

"Yeah, it was fun," I lied. Well, I sort-of lied. It *had* been fun sitting with Carly and basking in the bright sun. Some of the kids from school had gazed up at the two of us, and envy had glimmered in their eyes as bright as a diamond. They'd looked at me with, I don't know, more *respect* because I was sitting with Carly.

On the other hand, some parts had been not-so-fun. For one thing, a giant, clawed hand kept gnawing on my stomach all afternoon. Also, the fact that most of the words coming out of Carly's mouth were comments about how I could fix my appearance wasn't exactly enjoyable.

"You know, Olive, there are a lot of things you could do to, um, fix yourself up," Carly had said with plastic cheeriness. "For example, your skin is *so* pale, you kind of look like a

vampire, or like you have some ugly, contagious disease. You should really borrow some of my spray-on tanner if you want to be *popular*.” Other “advice” relating to my appearance included getting colored contact lenses, adding outfits that were “less drab” to my wardrobe, and wearing fingernail polish twenty-four seven.

“So what did you learn? Did you have to use your whistle because people were breaking the rules?” Mom insisted.

“Yeah, I learned a lot,” I said. It was true - I had learned a lot about how much Carly hated my appearance! “But I didn’t have to blow the whistle on anybody.”

“Oh, did the older lifeguards do that part because it was your first day?” Mom looked at me through the rearview mirror, and confusion caused her brown eyes to crinkle in the corners.

“Not exactly,” I replied hesitantly. At one point I had noticed some boys roughhousing in the deep end, which I *knew* was against the rules. I’d reached for my whistle, but Carly had stopped me.

“Why are you going to tweet them?” She’d asked, looking genuinely confused. “This is good entertainment!”

“Olive?” Mom said, still staring at me in the mirror, and I realized I had been zoning out. “Olive, is there something you’re not telling me?”

I sighed in defeat. “Alright, you got me. It’s just that we really didn’t get any training today. The girl who’s supposed to be teaching us isn’t very focused.”

“Really?” Mom said, and I detected a large dose of concern in her voice. “And what makes you think she wasn’t focused?”

“She kept secretly following this one boy around,” I admitted. “So she was really distracted. Plus, the other Junior Lifeguard was more interested in lounging around than learning the rules.”

“And who is this other Junior Lifeguard?”

“Carly Fisher. The lifeguard who was supposed to be training us was her older sister, Jennifer.”

“I see.” Mom blew a puff of air from her lips so that it ruffled her bangs. “Tell me, Olive - what did you write in your essay about why you were the best choice for a Junior Lifeguard?”

I swallowed hard. “I wrote that I had always admired other lifeguards, because they worked so hard at keeping others safe. I said that I would stop at nothing to do the same if I were a Junior Lifeguard.”

Mom said, “Then I think you know what you should do.”

“Mom!” I protested. “It isn’t my fault that Jennifer won’t train us properly!”

“You’re a young woman now, Olive,” Mom replied. “Take it upon yourself to find the information you need. Surely there are other lifeguards who you could learn from. However, it’s up to you to choose what kind of Junior Lifeguard you want to be.”

By that time we had arrived home, and Mom got out of the car. Yet I stayed, sunken into the plush seats, thinking about what I should do.

As I walked up to the pool gates the next day, I was just as nervous as the day before, but I tried not to let it show. I didn’t fidget with my whistle, and my back was as straight as a pole. Yet as confident as I looked, I wanted to keel over when I saw Carly sitting in a lifeguard chair nearby. No girl in our school would dream of doing what I was about to do.

“Hey, Olive,” Carly called as she saw me approach. As I got closer, she curled her lip slightly. “By the way, have you ever thought of straightening your hair? It’s so curly and wild, you look like Medusa. You know, that Greek monster who has snakes for hair?”

I felt my face turn as red as my uniform, but I chose to ignore it. “Carly, we can’t work together anymore,” I blurted out.

Carly stared at me disapprovingly. “Why not?”

“I feel like you don’t take things seriously enough.” I took a deep breath. “While having fun is important to me, this isn’t just a job - it’s about keeping people safe. If your sister won’t train us properly, I’ll find someone who will.” Carly’s face twisted into a scowl. “Good luck with that! The pool is understaffed right now. For the next week, my sister is the best we’ve got. Take it or leave it.”

My eyes darted towards Jennifer, who was chatting with another boy. Kids splashed around her, but she didn’t even glance at them. “Thanks,” I said. “But I think I’ll leave it.”

Over the next week, I took Mom’s advice and made it my personal mission to get some better training. After Carly told me that Jennifer was the only lifeguard on duty for the first week, I went to the front desk and asked if anyone else could take on extra shifts to train me.

Unfortunately, nobody else could come until the end of the week, so I went to our local gym and took a class on becoming CPR certified and how to do the Heimlich maneuver. Most of all, I studied the pool rules religiously and watched the kids like a hawk to make up for Carly’s lack of effort.

Finally it was the last day before another lifeguard could come to train me and Carly. I was in an especially good mood as I sat in a lifeguard perch near the deep end, humming and swinging my legs. Carly had mostly ignored me ever since I talked to her about wanting to take

things more seriously. The only time she spoke to me was to call me “Monster Girl” due to my vampire-skin and Medusa-hair. While it still bothered me, I was just happy that the guilty, scraping sensation in my gut had vanished.

Suddenly something caught my eye. Over by the snack bar, a little boy was waving his arms frantically. A hot dog was in his hand, but it fell to the ground as the kid clutched his throat.

Apparently Carly had noticed too, because she shrieked, “Oh my gosh, he’s choking! He’s choking!”

Immediately I was out of my seat and running across the sun-heated pavement. Why, oh, why had I chosen a seat so far from the snack bar? The boy’s lips began to turn light blue, and he was waving even more frantically. “DO THE HEIMLICH MANEUVER!” I yelled at the top of my lungs to Carly.

“I don’t know how!” She screamed, and tears were streaming down her face. “He’s going to die!”

Jennifer was nowhere in sight.

I was a yard away when the boy collapsed. I grabbed him around the middle and pushed, *hard*. A chunk of hot dog flew out of his mouth, but he still lay limply in my arms. I laid him down and began doing CPR. Push, push, *breathe*, push, push, *breathe*. After a few moments the sound of sirens pierced the air, and a raspy gasp came from the little boy’s mouth.

That’s when everything went black.

When I came to, I was on one of the plastic lounge chairs surrounding the pool. The first thing I saw was Mom, leaning over me. Her hair was escaping its bun, and her eyes were wild, like a frightened animal’s. At first I cringed... was I in trouble?

Then Mom said, "Olive, I am *so proud* of you."

"The boy," I croaked. "Is he okay?"

"He's already at the hospital." Mom stroked my hair. "They aren't certain, but the nurses think he'll be alright. His name is Billy."

I began to cry, and the salty tears running down my cheeks felt good, in a weird way. Mom leaned in to give me a hug.

Suddenly Carly came running up, and streaks of black mascara adorned her cheekbones. She was still sobbing as she said, "Oh, Olive, I'm s-so s-s-sorry! You were right - I didn't take things seriously, and s-someone almost died because of m-my mistake!" A wail escaped her lips.

Mom leaned in to give Carly a hug, too. "Darling, we've all made mistakes. Fortunately for you, my daughter was here, and things didn't end nearly as badly as they could have." Carly nodded, sniffing.

"What I want to know is, where was Jennifer?" I asked. "Wasn't she supposed to be here?"

"From what I hear, Jennifer will no longer be working here," Mom said, and her eyes smoldered like coals. "She had run off to flirt with some boy instead of doing her duty, so she was fired. She has to hope that Billy's parents won't press charges."

I nodded, not at all surprised. Jennifer had never seemed serious about her job.

Just then, one of the employees from the front office ran up to us. "We just got word from the hospital. Billy's going to be okay! Ma'am, your daughter's a hero."

Relieved, a shuddering sigh escaped my lips, and I knew everything was going to be okay. I had done my job.

First Place, Middle School Division:

“Mary Cinclare” by Rohit Paradkar

The picture on the website had lied. As I returned home from the last day of school, I could not believe my ears when my Mom told my brother Adam and me that we were going on a summer vacation, the following week. They had decided on a vacation home in Hawaii. My Mom could not wait to show us the pictures of the vacation home. It was on the beach and looked so majestic! It was huge and had incredible views. The next week just went by swiftly as I was occupied with excitement and all the packing and planning for our upcoming trip. The flight to Hawaii was long and tiresome but the thought of what was awaiting us eased the pain. I could not contain myself in the cab ride from the airport as it seemed to go on forever. But as soon as I stepped out of the cab I asked my parents if we had come to the wrong place. It looked like this was same house as seen on the website but looked older, and the surroundings looked entirely different from that in the picture. It seemed as if the pictures were taken about a century ago. This place seemed dull and mysterious. It even had a bit of a creepy atmosphere.

Our housekeeper, Mary Cinclare, welcomed us at the front gate. She was a tall middle-aged woman, with brown hair, and fierce green eyes. She had a stern voice but seemed cordial. She asked if we were hungry and brought us some cookies and milk. She then showed us to our rooms. The ancient wallpaper was peeling at the corners and the dim lighting gave the room a cold aura. We decided to swing by the beach for a bit. By the time we got back from the beach it was time to eat dinner. We went to bed soon after.

In the middle of the night I woke up to the sound of somebody crying. I opened the door a crack

and I saw the housekeeper crying softly and mumbling to herself. In the darkness, I noticed she had a very pale, ghastly complexion as she got up and went to her room. But somehow I thought, I didn't see her not go into her room through the door, but straight through the wall.

The next morning we went sightseeing, but I couldn't really enjoy it pay attention as I could not stop thinking about the housekeeper. That morning at breakfast, Adam had said that he had heard a strange noise coming from the living room. I asked him if he had seen anything, but he said he was creeped out and had decided to stay in bed. I wondered if I should tell my parents about what I had seen, but I assumed they would not believe me. I was awakened that night by some creaking noises. I opened the door a crack and saw the housekeeper in the living room. As she turned to her side, her skin looked pale, as white as powder. And her eyes were glowing red. She was coming towards my room so I very quickly jumped on the bed and pulled the sheets over my head. I heard my bedroom door slowly creak open. After about a minute I could hear her footsteps leading out of my room. I had always been told when I was younger that ghosts weren't real. But was that really true? Maybe this was just a prank and that Adam had put the housekeeper up to this. But when and where would Adam get so much makeup for the housekeeper to look so pale and how would her eyes look so red? I needed to find out more about this housekeeper.

After we got back from the beach, my parents told Adam and I that we could spend the rest of the day however we wanted. Adam was going to go to the beach and make a sand castle. I decided to spend my afternoon researching more about this vacation home. I found, after frantic searches on the web, that when this vacation home was established in 1907 the

housekeeper had murdered a group of people staying there. She had been sentenced to life in prison and had died of old age in the year 1947. What puzzled me was that the housekeeper's name was Maria Cincotta. Maria was a very similar name to Mary which was the current housekeepers name. Could it be possible that Mary was Maria and had returned to her house as a ghost? Cinclare also seemed pretty similar to the name Cincotta.

After looking through a book that was on the bookshelf in the library, I saw a picture of Maria Cincotta with her name inscribed on it. The resemblance between Mary Cinclare and Maria Cincotta was uncanny. They looked like the same person, which they possibly could have been. I was reading the book in my room when the housekeeper came in. She asked me what I was reading. I showed her the cover of the book. She looked alarmed. Maybe she knew that I was onto her. Then she asked to see the book. I handed it over to her. For a second she turned around and I saw a small glow right when she turned around and then suddenly it stopped. I asked her what the glow was, but she said that she accidentally had turned on her cell phone. That same night I thought if I should confide in Adam about the housekeeper. He had always believed what I told him. I decided that I should tell him. I planned to tell Adam the next morning about the housekeeper and how our vacation home was haunted. That night I decided that it would be best if I didn't observe the ghost. It seemed like she was already onto me. During dinner the housekeeper kept looking at me strangely. I felt that she knew I had seen the picture of Maria Cincotta. After dinner my parents told Adam and me to go to bed. Adam said that it was still too early to go to bed, but eventually he went. That night I slept very well. I guess this was my first time actually being able to sleep in this vacation home.

In the morning my parents said that we could go and play on the beach. It was the right time to confide into Adam, I thought. When we got to the beach I told him about what had happened. He could not believe me. I told him to sneak into my room that night so that he could see that the housekeeper was a ghost for himself. He said that he would sneak into my room at around nine o'clock. If my parents found Adam or I sneaking around after bedtime they would ground us for a month, so Adam had to make sure our parents and the housekeeper didn't find us.

When Adam got to my room it was about 9:30 pm. He said that our parents had come to check up on him. I asked him why they didn't check up on me. Adam said that they did but I had not actually seen them. I was relieved that they hadn't come 30 minutes later and seen Adam in my room or we both would have been grounded. At around midnight, the housekeeper came out. Some sort of object was in her hand. It looked kind of like a snow globe, except instead of snow there was something glowing inside of it. Then a light beam from the globe hit her. She became pale again and her eyes turned more red and vicious. Adam stood there in shock. He could not believe what was happening!

When Adam finally came back to his senses, he told me he had a plan to get us out of trouble. He told me that the two of us could go door to door to all the people in town and ask if there were any strange rumors about the housekeeper. Maybe we could collect more information about the housekeepers. But to use the plan we would need to be able to get out of the house. Adam thought of telling my parents that we could go house to house and find kids to play with on the beach, but I shot that idea down because I knew that our parents would never let us go to random stranger's homes. Finally Adam and I decided on telling our parents that we wanted ice cream

from the ice cream shop a few blocks away from our vacation home. That way we could play detective and get a nice, cold ice cream. When we asked our parents they agreed. On the first two tries we got no information. On the third house a teenager came to the door. When we asked him about the housekeeper, the teenager said that we should go to his grandpa. He said we would find him in the hotel that he owned. When we got to the front desk at the hotel, the employee asked us what we would like. We asked to meet the owner of the hotel. The owner's office was peaceful and soothing. One of the things I really loved about it was the little fish tank in one of the corners. The fish inside were beautiful. They had nice blue scales and swam around very peacefully.

The hotel owner was not at all what I thought he would look like. He looked incredibly old with tufts of gray hair shooting out from his scalp. He had a very bushy mustache and a beard. When he saw us, he asked what we were doing there, so we told him that we wanted to talk about the housekeeper at the creepy vacation home. The old man told us that his father had told him a lot about the vacation home. He said that once the old housekeeper had died in prison, the place was abandoned for about 50 years. Finally the current housekeeper came and bought it. The old man had said that the housekeeper who had murdered a group of people staying at the vacation home was because of drinking and depression. She had been seeing a psychiatrist about her problems, but eventually she just snapped. When she died everybody thought that the vacation home that she had owned was now haunted so nobody had ever bought the property until Mary Cinclare came to town from Boston.

Soon an employee working at the hotel told the owner that he was needed in one of his customer's rooms. The old man apologized and said he wished he had more time to give us some more information about the vacation home and the housekeeper. We told him that we would meet him near the section of the beach that was part of the vacation home's property. We then left. When we got out of the hotel we went and gathered more information around the neighborhood. One other piece of useful information we got was from a man who, at one of the annual neighborhood gatherings, had heard the apparently drunk housekeeper yelling at and hitting a small child. The man said that there were rumors that the housekeeper had even threatened to kill the child. Ever since that time nobody in the neighborhood even went near her property.

After some more perusing the neighborhood, Adam and I went back to the vacation home so that our parents wouldn't get suspicious about what we were doing. That night I heard Mary Cinclare, but decided to not do anything because I was very sleepy. After just two minutes I was asleep on my bed. In what seemed like only a few seconds it was already morning again. Luckily Adam rushed into my bedroom and woke me up. He told me that we had to run to the beach so that we could meet up with the old man. We slipped into some clothes and rushed for the beach. When we got there the old man was waiting for us. He told us that he had heard an interesting story from his father when he was growing up. Rumor had it that after the old housekeeper died, she had returned back to the vacation home as a ghost in the garb of a new housekeeper. He had confirmed my worst fears. I thought to myself "We were trapped and she would not keep us alive for long". When I prodded for more, the old man said maybe there was a way I could save my family but was far-fetched and did not know if it would work. He had heard

tales about how she had preserved her life source in her most precious valuable. It was a small snow globe that her father had gifted her on her sixteenth birthday right before he died in Pearl Harbor. The old man said that the only way to get rid of the being was to get the key which was hidden in an old dresser in her room.

To get into the housekeeper's room, we would have to use a distraction. Adam and I thought of many ways to get into that dresser. Finally we settled on starting a fire. And the perfect night to do it was that same night since my parents would be out at dinner. When we started the fire we ran inside the house and told the housekeeper. She ran out scared and screaming. Adam went to help and get water while I sneaked into her dresser and got the key. I found the snow globe under the housekeeper's bed as I started to unlock it the housekeeper came into the doorway with Adam. She told me that if I didn't put down the key and the snow globe at that instant then she would kill Adam. She suddenly started changing to her true form. She caught Adam by his neck and he screamed in agony. She started to plunge her nails into his skin and I could see him bleeding. I panicked and smashed the snow globe on the floor with all my strength. As it cracked into tiny little pieces, the ghost started vaporizing. I could see she was hurting but she soon disappeared in thin air. Adam was bleeding in a few places but said he would be fine. When our parents got back, we explained what had happened. They could not believe it but they hugged us and kissed us and said that they were extremely proud of the two of us. I threw my arms around my mom, and I felt safe again.

Honorable Mention, High School Division:

“An Account of One of My More Profitable Jobs” By Victoria Hecker

The picture on the website had lied. Instead of looking at the mansion or second home of some rich guy I was staring at an old apartment building in the ghetto. To be honest I should have known it was a lie after hearing the pictures raspy voice. It's not often that photographs talk (I've heard that most people are unaware that they can) and the ones that do are generally truthful, but if you run into one with a weird voice it means one of two things; either it's a liar or a rare find. Obviously mine was the former of the two.

After some deliberation with myself I decided to go ahead and ring the bell anyways, the picture hadn't been the only thing on the webpage after all. The need, amount of money, and employers address had also been available. Photos talk on their own and are no fault of the person who put them up so it wasn't a complete scam. Might as well get what I could.

The doorbell made a cheap buzzing noise when I pressed it and I stepped back so as not to surprise my client. With an awful creak the door was forced open from its original sloppy closure. Even with the mental prepping I had done ahead of time I was still shocked by what had presented itself before me.

A man in his late twenty's looked down at me in a state of surprise that equaled mine. I glanced at his stained sweats and tee-shirt and then his messy hair and five-o-clock shadow and sighed.

"My picture must have lied too." I mumbled.

"Excuse me?" His voice was young, not gruff like his pictures had been.

"Sorry, let's go inside and figure this out." I pushed passed him into the apartment. Piles of trash were lying around and all the furniture was old and stained.

“Hey, wait-“ He started to protest, but it was too late and I was too fast.

“You lock your doors?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Don’t bother, nothing to steal.” I plopped down on the cleanest part of the couch I could find. “Unless it’s not robbery you have to be careful of.”

“What? Look, kid-“

I cut him off again. “Someone tryin’ to kill you?”

He stepped back and glanced to the side.

I started laughing. “You’re so obvious. I mean what the heck. And even after you know someone is trying to knock you off you still hire an assassin so you can kill someone too? HA! You’re hilarious.”

“Hold up.” He said doing a double take, “You’re the assassin I hired? I mean that does explain the scythe you’re carrying but still-“

“Hey.” I said getting defensive, “You hired me. You have seen my customers’ reviews, not a single one it bad.”

“Well one guy said you were short but I wasn’t expecting,” He paused gesturing at me, “This.”

“So five year old girls aren’t allowed to be assassins?”

“Five! I thought you just had some kind of freak growth issue.”

“In my well-earned defense it is my third time being five and I’ve only ever failed at my job once.”

“Wait, what?”

“And anyway, you’re not the only one disappointed with what they got. I was expecting a rich guy, not some poor lie-about like you.”

“Wait, can we back up for a sec?”

“No, we don’t have time to waste, I want my money. Who do you need dead?”

“My cousin Dingston Harvy. But-“

“Dingston? Is that really his name?”

“Yes, now can we please-“

“Ha! Can you really pay me all that money?”

“Once you kill him, yes. Inheritance goes to me. Now what was that about you being five?”

“I told you, It’s my third time. No first time five year-olds have pink hair.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s very important obviously. Yeash, this must be your first time being, ummm, how old are you?”

“28.”

“Your first time being 28.”

“Pretty sure I’ll only be 28 once.”

“What weirdo planet are you from? Whatever, where does this Dingston live?”

It has been my tactic for many years to talk fast with a few distractions thrown in if a client starts to second guess their decision to hire me, it worked as well as ever this time. I wasn’t expecting him to be so dumb though, I mean who hasn’t had the talk about age flow? You are born, get old, get young, get old, etc. Everyone knows this. Well I figured it’d be better not to go too deep into explanations and let him figure it out himself. Instead I focused on the plan.

“Do you care if they know it’s murder or would you rather it look like an accident? Suicide?”

“Umm.”

“The costs will vary depending on what you choose. The cheapest way is for me to make an unsolvable murder, quick and simple. Suicide, accidents, or even framing someone else for murder all have extra costs. The price you set originally will be the full and final price only if you choose an unsolvable murder. But you know, the choice is yours.”

“You trying to coerce me into choosing the unsolvable one aren’t you.”

I gasped looking up at him in awe, “You saw through me. I’m amazed that someone as ignorant as you did that. Wait, maybe ignorance is all it is and you’re not actually an idiot! Is that true? Are you really not an idiot?”

“I’m not sure how I should respond to that, or how to still sound nice while doing it.” He answered in a testy tone. I must have annoyed him somehow, touched a secret nerve or something.

I decided to try and cool him down a bit. “It’s fine.” I said, “You’re ordering someone’s death after all, no need to be nice now of all times. Especially to the person you’re paying to kill for you.”

He could only look taken aback at my words, there was very little choice. I’ve learned over the years that most people tend to look that way when I talk to calm, I now take it as a look to demonstrate they’re feeling better.

I smiled at him to make sure he knew that I understood and turned my attention back to the business at hand. “So which death would you prefer he has?”

“Umm, probably the unsolvable murder. But, could you err-“

“Yes?”

“Make it a gruesome death?”

I laughed, “Of course! I’ll even do it for no extra cost.”

“Really? Then-“

“But,” I interrupted bring his face close to mine, “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

He looked at me again, closer this time, looking me in the eyes for the first time.

“Yes.” He whispered, “Wherever that choice might bring me, yes.”

I let him go so he could stand properly again, flashing him a bright smile, “Great. Give me his address and relax.”

“Here. Will you be collecting the payment personally or electronically?”

“No worries,” I said shouldering my scythe and heading for the door, “You’ll see me again.”

Mr. Dingston Harvy lived in a white mansion among many others like it, each one surrounded by clean cut grass. All this I saw from the top of a pine tree situated at the edge of the rich vicinity. Dingston himself I saw arguing on the phone in his bedroom on the second floor.

I jumped to the balcony as quietly as possible only to have my efforts of stealth ruined. Dingston turned to the glass doors that lead to where I had landed and dropped the phone in surprise.

The doors blew open inward, welcoming me in. Dingston sputtered in a terrified trance as I walked into the room. On the other side of the phone someone was yelling, trying to find out what had happened to the man they were speaking to seconds before.

“Hello” I grinned, “I’m sorry for interrupting your phone call, but I’m afraid you won’t be able to finish it.”

My scythe whistled as it came down, smashing the phone.

“Who- who are you?” The pig sputtered.

“An assassin.” I answered happily. My scythe rose once again.

The sun was setting when I finished my task, a red glow illuminating my handiwork. The man’s head lay on the vanity, the mirror reflecting a face contorted in fear. Anything that might have resembled a body no longer existed, leaving instead organs and a pulpy substance behind. Bits of bone gleamed here and there in the setting suns light. Red flowers now bloomed where white ones once stood in their vase and the windows and glass now were stained and splattered

with blood. A heart now lay on a pillow and intestines found themselves strung across the canopy bed. I stood in the middle of it all, blood spray across my face and hair and my scythe dripping with the crimson substance. My clothes glistened, wet with unseen blood against my black robe.

The balcony doors opened once again, allowing me to leave. I leapt down and started to run back to my client, the scene of my work left behind me in the shadowed room.

“You’re here.” My client exclaimed as I made myself known in his damp little room.

“Yep! And the task completed. You should get your inheritance once all the legal work is over, I suggest a good attorney to handle the matter.”

“You really do get the job done fast. Is it as I asked?”

“He is completely and utterly mutilated.”

“I suppose you would like to know the reason why I asked for that.”

“Not in the least. I don’t care to hear excuses that make my clients feel better about their decisions.”

“Well okay then.” He muttered, then out loud, “I can’t pay you until I collect the inheritance. Can you wait till then?”

“Of course. See you then” I left the man’s house and went to meet my next client.

Three months later it was time to meet my poor client again, except he was no longer poor. I found him in the same room as the unsolved murder, richly dressed with food before him literally on a silver platter.

“I will accept my payment in full.” I said startling him from his meal.

“You’re back.”

“Yep. You have your inheritance so now you can pay me back.”

“Of course” He laughed obviously enjoying his new life. He pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

I turned to check the amount saying, “I see that with all your wealth you still need a haircut.”

“Yes well, I figured that I should have something stay the same as a signature-“

“It’s disgusting.” I turned to see his shocked expression, “The haircut that is.”

“O-oh.”

I finished counting. “This is the full amount. Do you have any questions before we finish business?”

“There is one thing I’ve been wondering about.” He said cheerfully, his back was to me as he went through the motions of pouring wine. “Why are your eyes pink?”

He turned back to me, sipping his beverage. “Hold up.” He said after a pause, “Was I wrong? I could have sworn your eye’s were pink last time, not that red is any less a shocking color.”

“No.” I said looking up at him. I smiled, “You were right.”

“Oh? Then why are they red now. Do you put in colored contacts or something?” He chuckled.

“Scum.” I accused.

“What?” He looked down at me, getting his first real look.

“Those who wish for death and then try to forget their sin are scum.”

“E-excuse me.”

“It is the assassins code, at least on the website”

“W-what?”

“Scum don’t deserve to live.”

He had time for only half a scream.

I was on my way home when I looked at the review he had posted for me.

‘A fast worker and splendidly gets the job done despite her looks. Almost like she’s from another world.’

“Looks like I was wrong about both things.” I smiled to myself, “He was actually pretty perceptive.” My home planet came into full view in all its blue gaseous glory. I looked back to my web page and deleted his profile indicating that the job was done, “Also it seems that the picture on the website hadn’t lied when it spoke to me, it had given me a rare find. Two souls and five thousand dollars, Way more value than I was expecting.” I squealed in glee, plunging into Neptune’s atmosphere.

Third Place, High School Division:

“The Truth of Neptune” by Maggie Tibbitt

The picture on the website had lied.

They say that with old age comes confusion and forgetfulness. But I know my mind isn't playing tricks on me now. I'm staring at a photo gallery on some history website, displaying the beaming faces of newly immigrated families in the 1920's. The photo I'm looking at now features a family of four, the mother and father proudly standing behind their two young children, all of them smiling wide for the camera. *My mother and father.*

But it's a lie, I keep thinking.

I'd stumbled across this website by accident because my shaky hands aren't as steady as they used to be and I clicked on the wrong link. My age has turned my body against me, my once fair skin turning wrinkly and dry. I remember when my feet were able to carry my body gracefully across any dance floor. Now my legs betray me, and I rely on a walking stick to keep me standing most of the time. I squint my eyes to take a closer look at the photo in front of me.

A little girl and boy are clutching each others hands. But not just any little boy and girl. *Me*, in my grey dress and shiny black shoes Mama got me for my birthday. And I'm grasping little Emilio's hand next to me, as he holds his stuffed bear crushed against his chest, as if it can keep him safe if he holds it close enough.

Maybe the picture isn't lying, but it certainly isn't showing the truth. The black and white shades cover up the weeks worth of dirt that has settled on our skin. The blurriness doesn't display our torn and grimy clothing. Our forced smiles hide the discomfort of heat coming from the sun and the thousands of other bodies packed tightly into every available space. Our faces don't show the terrible times that were about to befall us. This photo doesn't show the whole truth.

The year is now 2000 but my memories from 1928 will never fade, even if the rest of me is slowly deteriorating. I have no idea how a photo of my family is showing up on a random history site, but I remember this day like no other. My mind flashes and suddenly I'm back on the steamboat staring at the breathtaking foreign land stretched out before me. I was 8 years old and needless to say, I was terrified.

I didn't want to be anywhere but back in my cozy home in Italy where Emilio and I could run freely around our land as Papa worked in the fields. No one ever bothered our family in Italy, but now, on the steamboat, strangers keep bumping into me and the unfamiliar touches make me uncomfortable. The wind whips my dark hair around my face and sprays tiny droplets of water from the never-ending ocean onto my olive skin.

"Mama, where are we going, again?" Emilio asks Mama as I brush my hair out of my mouth impatiently. He is only 6 years old, but he asks too many questions.

"The land we are going to is called New York, *bambino*. And then we will meet your aunt in New Jersey." My mother whispers in Emilio's ear, as if she's sharing a secret with him that only he can know.

"Nework." Emilio tries the strange name out, but his mouth is not able to form the right sounds.

"*New York*." I whisper to myself, wanting to try out the words on my own tongue. The words taste like promise and hope, but also uncertainty.

Mama and Papa told us we have to go to America to make money to take back to Italy. Papa needs more land for his farming but I say we have plenty. I could run and run and still not

reach the end of our property without needing to rest. But I suppose since I'm half as big as Mama and Papa, our land must seem half as big to them.

When I grow up, will I feel like the world isn't as big as I feel like it is right now? I wonder as I look out across the ocean where I can see shades of green and brown land quickly approaching. When Emilio notices we are getting close to land, he points and gets excited. I can't help but feel that we are leaving our culture and life behind us for this strange new place. I can't help but feel like there's nothing in this New Jersey place that can ever compare to my home. I can't help but feel dread creep into my stomach even though Emilio's anticipation is contagious and I start to get excited as well.

The first thing that pops into my brain when we finally have our feet back on land are the words *too much*. Too much everything. Too much noise, too many people, too many things gawk at, too much to take in.

No wonder all these places started with the word *New*. I couldn't see anything I recognized in this foreign place. Except the people, of course, but even they were strange. Their bodies were too thin, like they were slowly wearing away. Their faces didn't seem to show much emotion, and everyone was focused on getting to their destination, unlike me, intent on gapping at the tall buildings surrounding.

"Ruth, stay with us." My father hisses, but he seems more worried than angry. I rush along like the other Americans and it's the first time I feel like one of them.

Now we are sitting in a big, long car that Papa calls a train. We had trains in Italy too, but they weren't this advanced. The ride feels like it drags on forever, especially now that we are so close to Aunt's house. When we finally get to the building that her apartment is in, I sprint to her

front door and pound on it to let us in. My feet are exhausted, but I'm too big to be carried by Papa the way Emilio is.

Following my insistent pounding on Aunt's door is... silence. I'm expecting her to barge out any second, with plates of her special cannoli for all of us. She used to make it for us when we visited for holidays in Italy. The silence stretches out before me, long enough that Mama and Papa have finally caught up. Where is she?

A head capped with hair more orange than Papa's fresh carrots pops out from the doorway next to Aunt's. There are dark circles under her eyes, a stark contrast to her pale skin.

"Are you looking for Miss Russelo?" the woman asks, barely above a whisper.

"Yes, yes! She is our Aunt, where is she?" Emilio and I both jump up and down in anticipation of finding out where Aunt must be hiding. But the woman only looks at us wistfully, and she hesitates, as if she is scared to keep talking to us.

"I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you," the woman says as she stares intently at her worn shoes, "but she left only a week ago. She said she couldn't stay here anymore, she had no food and no work. But she told me to give you this." She hastily steps out of her doorway and in her outstretched hand is an envelope. Mama takes it without a word as the woman rushes back into her home. We all jump as the door slams, leaving us in stunned silence.

Mama is the first one to recover and she rips open the envelope and silently reads the letter inside. Papa reads over her shoulder, and the longer they read, the more worried their faces become.

"She left the house to us." Mama says in voice mixed with shock and confusion as she looks up at Papa. "What do we do now?" They both look down at me and Emilio, as if they just remembered we're still here.

The next few months are a blur. We move into Aunt's house and fall into a routine. A routine where Papa leaves the apartment for work in the morning, Mama and I do chores for neighbors for a little extra money, and our plates of food get smaller and smaller every day. On the days I get really hungry, I dream about how full our bellies were in Italy, and I wonder for the thousandth time why we ever left our home behind.

Before I know it, it's my 10th birthday. I wake up without the giddy feeling I used to get when I was younger. America has taught me how to grow up fast, but I didn't really get a choice. There were lessons I had to learn fast: sacrifice, strength, perseverance. I know what it feels like to be hungry now. I know what it's like to have no new toys, and dirty clothes. Papa does his best working on the streets, trying to sell anything he can find to passers-by. But it's not always enough.

My whole family now looks like the Americans I saw on my first day here. Our cheekbones have sunken into our faces, and our skin clings tighter to our bones from hunger. The layer of dirt that I thought would go away when we arrived, now sticks to our bodies every single day. Emilio struggles even more than the rest of us. He gets sick often, and is too weak to work for money for our family.

The Great Depression hit our family hard. Harder than most. We hadn't even been able to settle into American life before the economy ruined all of our dreams of a brighter future. I try not to think about home too much because wishful thinking never does me any good. But every

night I wish that we could just go back in time and never step on the wretched steamboat that took us here in the first place.

I thought my birthday would go by just like any other day, since we have more important things to worry about. So I'm surprised when Mama and Papa give me 10 cents to buy a treat as a present. I walk downtown to pick out something tasty to eat from one of the peddlers on the street. As I walk slowly through the crowd of people, my mind wanders to Emilio, currently stuck in bed with another fever. This time seems worse than all the others, Papa thinks he has pneumonia.

After deliberating, I decide I shouldn't be selfish, even if it is my birthday, and I pick out a warm loaf of bread that'll fill Emilio up, and hopefully he'll get some energy back.

When I return to our tiny living space, I'm hit with the familiar stench. Our whole family lives so close together and rarely bathes, so we know we just have to put up with the smell. But then I notice another, more pungent smell when I walk in. I soon recognize it as vomit and... blood.

"Mama?" I yell, uneasiness in my voice. I hear rustling in the next room, and I rush over to find Emilio sprawled on the floor, a brown liquid splattered next to him. I'm instantly at his side, and I notice his eyes are rolling into the back of his head, and his forehead is burning so much that I don't want to touch it for too long. I'm not thinking about catching whatever illness Emilio has, all I can think about is how to get him better, how to fix this.

My mind is racing as I check for a pulse, but my heart stops when I don't find one. Burning hot tears are suddenly pouring down my cheeks in a constant stream. I stare down at Emilio's peaceful face, wondering why everything couldn't be different. I wanted Emilio to never

have to sacrifice anything the way the rest of us did. I wanted him to be able to go back home to Italy someday to start a family of his own. He had a better chance than the rest of us to have a long, happy life. Now that chance is gone.

I feel helpless, rocking back and forth, clutching Emilio to my chest, the way he used to with his teddy bear. I knew I should find Mama and Papa and figure out what to do, but I know Emilio is gone and I want these last precious moments with him.

Emilio was always the positive one in the family, forcing everyone to look on the bright side of things. I hate myself for thinking that the bright side of his death is that we will have one less mouth to feed, one less body in our room.

But Emilio was my rock. He reminded me of home, and he also reminded me to have hope. He seemed to symbolize all of the possibilities there were in our new home. He never gave up, not when we first found out Aunt had left, not when the Depression hit, not when Papa got laid off and couldn't find work for several weeks.

I hear a doorbell ring, and I'm startled. We don't have a doorbell in our tiny apartment, if you can even call it that. The sound transports me through 70 years and I'm back in the present.

Ding-dong. The now impatient sound rings out again, shaking me free from my memories. I snatch my walking stick from where it was leaning next to the computer desk, and strain to get myself standing as quickly as my legs allow.

I know when I open the door I'll find my daughter and her three little kids waiting. They come over every Sunday to visit because I insist. Family means everything to me, ever since I lost Emilio and realized how important he was to my life.

The door opens, and I'm greeted with cheerful giggles and smiles that only children are capable of.

"Come on in, crazy kids!" I say with a smile, and ruffle the hair of one of my grandchildren.

They rush past me, into the playroom I have set up for them. I bring my daughter into a warm embrace and we fall into the easy conversation we always have.

These are the moments I live for. I've never returned to my home country because I've found my peace in America. This is my home now. I am no longer hungry, or afraid that I won't make it to the next day. I honor my brother's legacy by remembering him every day. The truth lives in my memories, it doesn't matter that a picture can't show the pain my family went through in our first years. I keep our true history close to my heart.

Second Place, High School Division:

“Fall from (Lack of) Grace” by Nicole Eiland

The picture on the website had lied. The thin, wet-looking haze I remember squinting at was more like a choking sea of grey fog. Wet, cold, confining. Altogether unpleasant and dramatically unlike the blog writer's description of Indianapolis, with its 'bright, sunny skies 72% of the year.'

Yeah right.

Props to us for choosing to come here during the other 28%.

Yay especially for Donovan because who knows? Maybe he'd still be okay if the fog hadn't made the visibility index basically zero and things that are normally graspable slippery.

If you look at it that way, the accident wasn't really his fault...

Realistically, though, it was. You get stupid, you get hurt.

And Donovan did get stupid. And he did get hurt.

"Nationals," Ms. Kelly had said, "Will be unlike anything you have ever experienced."

She got that right.

"Just picture it," she had continued. "The sixty of us, twenty other bands from across the country, one huge hotel, five concert halls..."

Everyone was whispering. Raising their eyebrows. Scheming.

I had knowingly looked over at Tori diRayas. Would the alcohol go into sunscreen bottles or toothbrush containers this year?

"Hey, snap out of it!" Ms. Kelly's voice had gone sharp... just like the clarinets in the freshmen band... very quickly. We sixty, tired, excited band nerds zipped it, internally rolling our eyes.

On one hand, I was ready for this to be over. All the late night practices, more practicing at home, recorded, graded playing tests that were basically the reason I was practicing at all.

Too much.

On the others hand...

No. There was no other hand. I was ready to be done.

“Riley!”

Several cents past sharp now.

“Are you listening?”

I had grimaced, flashing a painful thumbs up. “Yep.”

She would never admit it, but Ms. Kelly was ready for this to be over, too.

If you squeezed your eyes just right and smeared a corner of the fogged window for just long enough, you could kind of see a faint haze of gold streaming in from the city. But it also might have been a reflection from the lamp on the hotel nightstand.

The JW Marriott was massive. So extremely massive that after practically falling out of the crowded bus into the parking lot and looking up, I couldn't see the top through the fog. 71 stories. I had dreamed of being near the top.

But naturally, our room key led us nowhere but up one flight of stairs. 2nd floor.

1200 miles and man, was I getting a room with a view.

The boys were above us. Like directly above us. For the past hour a few of them had been communicating by rhythmic stomps on our ceiling. Regardless of the fact that it was nearly midnight. I'm a big fan of self expression and all, but this had started to drive me up the wall. Almost literally, too, because that was one step closer to pounding them myself.

I blamed Sierra. The only one of my three roommates not horizontal yet. She was communicating back by texting, egging them on. Another chorus of stomps echoed from above. These ones sounded suspiciously like the random six-eight measure thrown into one of our pieces.

“Is that the six eight bar in Dance of Nomads?” I asked Sierra.

She nodded, smirking. “I’m going to tell Daniel *that’s* why we practiced that measure five thousand times... because he was the one who kept playing it wrong.”

“So it’s him stomping.”

“Yep.”

Perfect. Daniel Asher was the biggest punk in the music program. We literally got banned from the arcade at a mall in Dallas because of Daniel Asher.

“Who else is in his room?”

“Uh.” Sierra looked up, counting off her fingers. “Daniel, Wyatt, Joseph, and...”

A knock interrupted her. We both looked to the door, alarmed. “ROOM CHECK!”

I winced, glancing over at Amy and Kara. Somehow they both managed to not wake up.

“My leg’s asleep,” Sierra muttered. She hobbled toward the door. “Don’t tell whichever chaperone this is, but the guys want to meet up in the lobby and play poker later...”

I recoiled. Exactly what you don’t want to do on a band trip - get sent home because you broke the rules. Sierra flung open the door, and I reached over to turn off the muted TV so Ms. Kelly wouldn’t harass us.

Plot twist: totally unnecessary.

I crawled over to the edge of the bed to see Sierra laughing up at Donovan Tines. Room check.

Mm hm.

Did I say Daniel was the biggest punk in band? My bad. Replace -aniel with -onavan.

“Hey, Riley.” Donovan was looking past Sierra. He jutted his chin up, and I scowled as he walked right into our room.

“Get out,” I told him bluntly. “I legitimately have Ms. Kelly on speed dial.”

Donovan rolled his eyes, but backed up. “Chill,” he muttered under his breath. And then, about three and a half step backs, his eyes caught sight of the door at the east end of our room.

“Hey!”

“Can you shut up?” I hissed. “In case you’re blind, Amy and Kara are asleep.”

Sierra, realizing his presence probably wasn't a smart move, halfheartedly added, “Seriously, Don, Ms. Kelly would *murder* you if she knew you were in here.”

Not if I got to him first. Punk.

“You guys have a balcony?” Donovan was mesmerized. “Is it locked? Can you get out there?”

“Nope,” I said, at the same time as Sierra’s, “Yeah.”

We exchanged a glance. Donovan stood paralyzed, transfixed by the door. The one or two wheels left in his brain were turning.

“Okay, Don, go to bed or something,” Sierra repeated, slightly louder. He didn't even acknowledge her voice. It was like he couldn't hear. Then Kara yawned, starting to mutter a croaky, “What’s going on?”

Donovan looked toward her wildly, like he was caught doing something way worse than standing in our room.

Before Kara could fully wake up, he was gone, and Sierra had locked the door behind him.

“Everything okay?” Kara asked sleepily. “Why are you guys still up?”

Sierra padded over to our bed. “Great question.” She lay down, all rumors of poker gone. I leaned back uneasily. Two minutes ago she was ready to sneak down to the lobby...

“Good night,” Sierra said, flicking off the lamp.

Well, that ended quickly.

I closed my eyes. Tomorrow we were performing. I took a deep breath. Twenty four more hours and it would be over.

“Night.” I could see the glow of Sierra’s phone screen under the covers.

Whatever.

I drifted off. I was halfway asleep before I realized that the pounding had stopped.

There was a voice. Loud enough that I couldn’t ignore it. A girl. Mom? No, not Mom. She was back at home. Sierra? Probably. She must have been sleep talking.

But it was cold. A lot colder than earlier.

I forced my eyes open, blinking myself awake.

There weren’t any lights on in the room. So why was it bright?

I squinted at the clock. Three twenty six am. Wasn’t the sun.

Oh. The door to the balcony was open. There must have been a breeze that blew it open. That would explain why it was cold, too.

I pulled myself out of bed, noticing that Sierra wasn't on the other side. Probably in the bathroom.

I yawned on the way over to the balcony door. It was way too early. Or too late. Whichever way you looked at it.

My hand was on the knob, ready to push it closed. But something was off.

Wait, what?

Through a cloudy mask of fog, I could see two figures out on the balcony. Sierra and Daniel Asher. I internally groaned. When was enough enough? I marched out onto the balcony.

“What in the world are you guys doing?” I demanded grumpily. “We have a PERFORMANCE in six hours and there is no way ...”

They barely looked at me. Both of their necks were craned upward, staring at something through the fog. Sierra had her phone out, videotaping whatever phenomenon was going on above us.

“What are you looking at?” I joined them against the balcony railing, facing up. At first I couldn't tell. The fog was too thick, and the eerie light from the city was barely adequate enough to see Sierra right next to me. “Sierra...” My voice trailed off as a square of fog dissipated and the night became clear.

Oh my god.

Twenty feet above us was the window to the boys' room. Somehow, it was open.

Three or four feet behind that, two of them were holding onto a couple of bed sheets tied together.

Four feet below the window was Donovan, clinging to the sheets and whooping like an Indian.

Sierra and Daniel started laughing. I couldn't move. I couldn't even think. How could this possibly appeal to anyone? Did they have no common sense?

“Swing him!” Daniel suddenly yelled up to Joseph and Wyatt.

Swing him? As in pull a boy hanging out of a window by a bed sheet back and forth? Two and a half stories above the ground? In the dark?

Donovan threw out a quick thumb up at the suggestion before returning his grasp to the sheet. Another wave of fog blew between him and us. There was something about not even being able to see him... I swallowed. What if the sheet snapped?

My mind started swirling. “This is a terrible idea, guys,” I told Sierra and Daniel anxiously. I moved toward the door. With enough luck, I could find Ms. Kelly before they did something even stupider.

But then a sudden gust of wind slammed it shut. Oh no... This certain door locked from the outside.

This wasn't happening.

Joseph and Wyatt had started to swing the sheets. Very slowly at first, but with Donovan adding to the momentum, he was soon careening far to both sides of the narrow balcony.

“WHEE!” Donovan hollered.

I felt sick. “Sierra,” I begged. “Make him stop! This is such a horrible...”

There was an awful sliding noise, followed by a surprised yell. I choked as Donovan's suddenly alarmed voice cut through the fog. “Guys, stop swinging,” he was calling, panicked. “My hands just slipped...”

I was shaking my head, paralyzed. No, no, no, no, no... I caught a quick glimpse of Sierra's face. Obviously, something had clicked in her mind, too, that this wasn't funny anymore. It was dangerous.

Donovan was about two feet lower now, but the sheet was still swinging. The boys above us hadn't heard him over their manic laughing.

The fog was hiding him from view. "Don!" Daniel yelled. "You good?"

No cohesive answer. Just frantic shouting.

"Guys, cut it out!" Daniel tried calling to the room above us.

No response. The sheet kept swinging, and Donovan kept hurdling from side to side.

"This sheet is wet!" we heard him scream. "It's slipping!"

Another smack of dread hit me. This couldn't be real...

"Do something," Sierra begged Daniel. But he could only shrug helplessly. That was it. I ran to the door, pounding. "Amy, Kara!" I yelled. My phone was inside. Ms. Kelly was inside. Help was inside. And we were trapped out. "Guys, please!" What else, what else could I do?

I whirled around. Sierra! Sierra had her phone.

"Sierra!" I screamed. "Call 911!"

She shook her head, her wide eyes locked on Donovan. "No service," she choked.

My heart was thudding. I could literally hear it in my ears. "Hold on, Donovan!" I yelled.

What could we possibly do?

It was so dark. So wet. How far was the ground below us? Twenty feet? Thirty? Were we above the parking lot or the grass?

The sheet was still swinging Donovan from side to side. Waves of fog fused with the dark, making it hard to see more than reeling shadows.

“Stop!” Donovan was screeching. “Please, stop!”

The boys above us must have heard that time, because the sheet’s arc started to slow down. Except slowing it down made each swing more jerky. And making each swing more jerky...

I returned to beating my fists on the balcony door. “AMY, KARA!”

They weren't answering. Why weren't they answering?

“Oh god, he’s going to fall,” I heard Sierra breathe behind me.

Donovan was shouting frantically. I flipped around, right in time.

Right in time for the wind to blow away a veil of fog. Right in time to see Donovan’s hands flail as he was over the right side of the balcony.

Right in time to hear his scream fly by us and grow quickly farther away.

“DONOVAN!” We threw ourselves against the railing of the balcony, trying to see below us. It was impossible.

The dark had hidden him from us, ideally aided by the stifling, menacing fog.

Second Place, High School Division:

“Pictures of Love” by Ellie Ford

The picture on the website had lied. By no means did that two dimensional spectrum of colors come close to comparing with real thing. Bright swirls of green danced across the starry skies.

“Nothin’ quite like it, eh, Thomas?”

My gaze remains transfixed on the Northern Lights. “Kathryn will love this...”

“I’m sure she will.” Edgar chuckles and slaps me on the back. “Come on, baldy, let’s get out of here.” He jumps into the front of the old jeep. “Long road ahead of us.”

“Hold on...” I adjust my glasses and snap a photo of the glorious sight. I tug at my cap and sigh, thinking of the woman I’ve lived with for nearly sixty years.

“Thomas...”

I turn to Edgar. We need to leave. Right. I take one last, long glance, and hop in after him. I lean back and close my eyes, thinking more of my wife...

“Thomas, we’re here.”

I sit up and shake my head, blinking around. “Mmm...” I gaze blearily at front of Fairbanks International Airport. Groaning, I wrench my protesting body from the seat. “I’m getting to old for this...”

“Nah, you’re only eighty-two.” Edgar grins as he watches me.

Laughing, I help with the luggage.

* * * * *

A teenage girl with chocolatey skin throws her baton in the air and catches it as she marches through the high school parade.

An Italian senior captures the moment it leaves the air on camera. A giant grin spreads to his equally sizable spectacles.

As soon as it's developed, the boy promptly presents it to the girl, and demands she take him on a date.

The girl laughs at him, but agrees.

Later that week, the two set out for a picnic.

The girl opens her basket, and reveals some fried chicken she made up for him and herself

His mama had always said fried chicken was the best picnic food, and he wholly agreed. Now he peers down at the cooked fowl in the girl's basket.

She grins at the expression on his face...he seemed to like this far more than she had envisioned.

Then he sweeps his arms around her and presses his lips against hers.

* * * * *

Thick sheets of white roll beneath the airplane. I turn to the twenty-somethin' blond girl in the seat next to me. "Don't those clouds look like a pretty great place to sleep?"

She blinks at me with a bright smile, and peers out the window. "Yeah, they kinda do."

"I don't suppose it would really work...you'd just fall right through."

"It's a fun thought, though," she says. "It's how I imagine heaven...a giant palace atop a layer of cloud." She shrugs. "I wonder what it's actually like. Maybe I should try asking..." she trails off, eyes now downcast. "...Mom." Her voice cracks.

My thoughts drifting back to Kathryn. “I’m sure she’d be happy to tell her...”

“Excuse me...” the woman gets up and stamps to the bathroom.

I glance back at Edgar, who’s sitting on the aisle opposite from me. I turn to the window and take a picture.

* * * * *

They sit in his parents’ authentic Italian restaurant.

He spends their date taking pictures of her, rather than eating any food.

She laughs at him and insists that he should stop.

He continues to take picture after picture anyway.

His father comes in and lectures the boy about wasting nice food, but in a good-natured manner. While he does so, he makes wild and emphatic hand gestures, all to amuse his son’s date.

He whoops right along and makes several jokes of his own.

After a while, they’re alone. His camera is set aside for the time being. Then, he gets down on his knee, and proposes to her.

* * * * *

I wait in the luggage area, tapping my old camera against my leg as the time, slowly slips by. Something feels wrong...

The haze of people before me grows fuzzy. I clean my glasses, but that doesn’t help. Everything’s too loud, the light’s too bright.

“You alright?”

My eyes snap to Edgar. He's standing right next to me, two cups of coffee in his hands.
"Yeah, just need to sit down a bit."

"Go do that." He put one of the cups in my hand. "Want you in one piece for Glass Beach. I'll wait for the suitcases."

I nod and wander away. Slumping into a seat, I take a sip of the drink, not at all bothered by its scalding heat. People keep coming by, asking if I'm okay, if I need help. I wave 'em off, giving some excuse, like I'm just tired after the flight. If they'd just leave me alone, I could get the peace and quiet that I need.

Eventually, we check out. I mutter something in Italian as I put my stuff in the back of the jeep.

"He's using Italian...he's in a bad mood."

I glance at Edgar. I shake my head and drop into the driver's seat.

"Hey...maybe I should take the wheel for this stretch...you ain't doin' so hot..." Edgar clasps the top edge of the window.

I shake my head. "Need to distract myself...can't much do that if I'm not driving."

Edgar sighs. "Alright. But if you have a heart attack, it's on your own head."

"I'd think it would be in my chest..."

Edgar laughs.

Twenty minutes later, my cell phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and hand it to Edgar. "Answer that?"

Edgar takes the phone. "Hello? No...this is Edgar, Thomas is driving...oh my...you sure? How...yes, I'll tell him...see you soon...goodbye." He hangs up. "Thomas turn around. Now. Go back to the airport. She's gotten worse."

I make a U-turn as soon as I can.

* * * * *

They get married. For their honeymoon, she wants to go around the world and visit an assortment of places, such as the Pink Lake in Australia, Neuschwanstein Castle, Glass Beach in California, and, most of all, the Northern Lights.

They talk about it for hours, the restaurants that they would go to, the hotels where they would stay, how long it would all take.

That night, after she goes home, he lays in bed as one thing occurs to him, that he'd never thought to consider before...the cost.

The more he thinks about it, the more he realizes that there's no way that they can go on such a trip...it will be far too expensive.

When he next sees her, he explains this all to her, hoping she will understand. He promises that one day, when they can afford it, he will take her to all those places she wants to visit.

Disappointment is evident in her gaze, but she understands. As he makes this vow though, she throws her arms around him and gives him a kiss.

* * * * *

I stare at the list of flights. Ours is still half an hour away. I don't know how, but Edgar somehow stopped me from yelling at the employee that informed us. I know I'm old, and am

supposed to have all the patience in the world, but I don't. I never have, and it always drove Kathryn crazy.

I rub my eyes. *Kathryn*. I can just imagine how she'd react. She'd be tellin' me, "Tommy, just relax...you'll get there at the right time!" Well, she's not, so here I sit, tapping my foot, muttering under my breath in Italian.

"Just fifteen minutes," Edgar murmurs, glancing at his watch.

"Sixteen."

"What?"

"Sixteen minutes, not fifteen."

Edgar sighs, but doesn't say anything.

"How long? How long did Ebb say?"

Edgar gives no answer.

"Ed. How long does she have?"

"A week at most."

I don't have a response. I focus on my shoes.

I'm on my feet the second they call our flight, and I'm the first on the airplane.

* * * * *

Many times, their plans to travel the world come up in, but she always says the same thing...the time isn't right.

He argues with her when she says this...if they don't go soon, they'll never go.

Then, she wins the battle by announcing her pregnancy.

He holds back for several years, but shortly after their little boy's fifth birthday, he can't stand it anymore, and insists that they start setting aside money for this trip.

She reminds him that there's no way they could afford to do so...they were barely scraping by from one paycheck to the next.

He grumbles through nearly six decades.

Then one morning, she brings up the possibility of traveling the world.

For a moment, he's taken aback, but jumps right in.

They save their money, and once again talk about where they're going to go.

One evening, after plane tickets have been bought, and hotel rooms reserved, he finds her lying unconscious on the bathroom floor.

Their plans disintegrate at the same speed as the ambulance rushing her to the hospital.

But, with just a month to live, she tells him to go on without her.

He fights her, insisting he needs to be with her, but she's adamant. She informs him this is the only way left to fulfill the promise he made all those years ago.

This convinces him. In less than a week, he leaves their small town of Oregon with his closest friend and his trusty camera.

* * * * *

At my insistence, we come straight to the hospital from the airport. I'm exhausted and worn out, but I don't care. Edgar drops me off, and leaves with my camera, promising to get the film developed after he sleeps a bit.

Carefully, I push open the door to my wife's small room.

Ebb, my son, sits in a chair near Kathryn's bed, chatting with her.

Kathryn sees me and stops talking. She smiles. "Hey, Tommy. How was the trip?"

I sit down in the other available chair, and pull it close. "It was wonderful...would have been much better with you.

"Can't really get that much better than wonderful," Kathryn points out.

I shrug. "Well you are."

"I'm going to get myself some coffee," Ebb announces, standing up. Then, he leaves the room, so that Kathryn and I could be alone.

"When did you last sleep, Thomas?" Kathryn asks.

I blink. She uses my full name, meaning she's in lecture mode. I shake my head. "Just a few hours..."

"Was it sleep in the car? Cuz that ain't real sleep."

"Kath..." I can't believe we're having this discussion.

"You get yourself home and get some rest, now."

"I'm not doing that. I'm staying with you...I'll get some rest later."

She raises both hands. "Thomas, you'll put *yourself* in the hospital...then we can't be together."

"I'm not doing it. I'm staying right here, and you aren't convincing me not to."

Kathryn sighs. "Alright. Stay all you want." She closes her eyes. "So you took pictures of them on that old camera? All those places I wanted to go?"

"Sure did." I smile, and gently place my hand her cheek. "Promise me you'll stick around long enough to see them."

“Course I will,” Kathryn murmurs. She reaches up a shaky hand and grabs mine. Then, she drifts off to sleep.

I tightly clasp her hand in mine, not letting it slip, or drop.

* * * * *

He sits near her for the next several days of the week, waiting as the photographs developed.

She has so little time, but fights, if merely to keep her promise to him.

To distract her, he tells her of his trip, about all the hotels he stayed in, about some of the crazy people he met, and about him and his friend running out of gas, and ending up stranded on the side of the road, near the border between Germany and France.

Despite all her efforts, she gets weaker as the days pass. She spent more of her time unconscious, rather than awake.

Rather than getting agitated and impatient about the old man simply grew sad. By this point, he was certain that the pictures weren't going to be done in time.

Then one day, his friend knocks on the door.

He tells his friend to come in, rubbing his wife's hand as she slept.

The friend enters and waves a manila envelope.

He doesn't notice at first, but eventually looks up, and smiles. He reaches over and gently shakes her shoulder.

When she wakes, he spends the next twenty minutes showing her his photos from around the world.

Her tired eyes gleam with happiness. She feels as though she were visiting the places herself, as he describes every detail. Soon though, she falls asleep.

Later that evening, she passes away.

Hours turn to days, days into weeks, and weeks into years. A picture of her, along with the many he'd taken for sit up on the mantel.

He wonders how things would've been different, had they gone before she got sick. He surely would have snapped the very same photos.

But alas, there's nothing he can do to change what happened, and he knows this. Who knows? Maybe it truly was better this way. Despite his grief and loss, he finds a certain peace...he'd fulfilled his promise to her. Now, dear old Thomas Fiore gazes up, day after day, at those pictures of love.

First Place, High School:

“Purple Problems” by Kristen Kater

The picture on the website had lied. I guess that's what happens when you order hair dye from a website called Alexscatsandcosmetic.org, which sold- you guessed it- cats and makeup.

Which is probably why my hair was now the deepest shade of *purple* that the world had ever seen.

I didn't even like purple. Being partially colorblind meant that I couldn't always tell the difference between purple and blue and I tended to lean more towards the blue side of the spectrum. The confusion had forever sworn me off the shade. There was no denying however, that my hair was undeniably, horribly, VERY (even for me) purple.

The box had looked fine when I got it. A little dusty and smelling vaguely like catnip, but the model on the cover had glorious chocolate locks and I had been itching to change my boring blonde hair all summer.

The results however, looked nothing like Cocogirl176's picture of herself on the website. Her review had convinced me to buy the hair dye in the first place, positively glowed with pride about Cocogirl's own luscious locks and how her husband "loved, loved, loved it"!

I wasn't sure about husbands, but I knew that I had theatre in ten minutes and even being an inconspicuous stage hand, my hair was bound to attract some attention.

I swallowed hard and tucked the violet mess under the nearest baseball cap I could find. It hid most of it, but a few straggly baby hairs escaped around my ears. I grimaced and grabbed my backpack off my bed. It would have to do.

The thing about the Roswell theatre group is that even though I arrived five minutes late due to a nasty wind blowing the hat off and several minutes of awkwardly chasing it, they are still just starting to meander towards the stage when I walk in.

"Hello Veronica." The director, Marilyn licks powdered sugar off her fingers as she walks towards me. I watch her carefully to make sure she doesn't stab herself with her floozy red fingernails that have to be as big as my eyeballs.

"We need a new tree. Garth broke one." She says, wiping her freshly licked fingers off on her black skirt. I resist the urge to offer her a napkin.

"Okay."

"And Malcolm tripped and broke the sound system." She goes on.

"I got it." I shoulder my backpack a little higher and follow her down to the stage. She snags another donut as she walks and stuffs it in her mouth, coating her red lips with powdered sugar.

I wince and slip past her to the small set of stairs leading up to the stage. Two people, Riley and Tucker Norman, our leads, stand so close they might be kissing. Tanner towers a good foot above Riley, with black tousled hair that always looks like he just rolled out of bed. On him it looks good, and the way he's grinning down at Riley makes butterflies erupt in my stomach. Lucky for me and my sanity, the two of them are related. Or I might have accidentally dropped a sandbag on Riley's head.

"Veronica, the mics please."

I jog now, backpack slapping between my shoulder blades. Tucker smiles at me, dimples popping and I almost drop the mic, my hands get that slippery.

"Hey V."

"Hi." I squeak, then blush almost the same color as my new hair. Tucker just smiles though, taking it in stride.

"Nice hat." He says. My cheeks are definitely the color of my hair now.

"Thanks." My voice comes out too high. Tucker winces ever so slightly.

"Gotta, um. Tree." I mumble and practically sprint off the main stage. Marilyn starts barking directions as I sit down behind a box of crates with green paint and a tree bent over my knee. Midsummer nights dream is not supposed to be this much gooey eyes romance, I'm sure of it. Tucker's making faces at Marilyn as Georgia squeezes his bicep.

"Hey, V. Did you get the sound system fixed- oh!"

My best and only friend, Malcolm knocked my hat off my head in way of greeting. I scrambled desperately for my hat, violet hair tumbling around my shoulders. The tree clattered off my lap to the floor followed shortly by a herd of boxes.

The theatre was deathly silent in the aftermath of my mishap. I looked up, my cheeks burning red. Behind me, Malcolm his knuckles to his mouth, holding back his burst of laughter.

"Veronica. I trust you have a reason for. . . oh, your hair." Marilyn stared up at my scalp. I fumbled for the baseball cap and yanked it over my head, my hair falling out in pieces around my face.

"Uh. So-sorry." I wrung my t-shirt between sweaty palm. "I'll clean this up."

"Veronica, your hair is purple." Tucker said obviously. I chewed my lower lip, the t-shirt turning into a mangled mess in my hands.

"Nice hair V!" Malcolm cheered. I shot him a glare and pulled the hat lower over my face, shuffling to the cleaning supplies.

"Nice color change Veronica. Very artistic." Riley said, trying to be nice. I worked to keep the grimace off my face.

"I was trying to be brunette."

"Oh. Well, it looks good on you." Tucker gave me a camera ready smile. My red face became even redder and I dragged myself off of the stage, into the safety of the sound booth. Malcolm followed me, cackling all the way.

"I'm sure your mom is just thrilled."

"She hasn't seen it yet, so zip it." I jabbed my finger in Malcolm's face. When your friends since kindergarten you're obliged to threaten liberally. And Malcolm, classic prankster, probably couldn't have thought of something better than my hair himself.

"I don't know V. Purple suits you." Malcolm rested his pointed chin on his fist, a mischievous smile lighting up his face. I flicked an ear piece at him.

"It was a mistake. As soon as I figure out how to reverse it I will be back to normal." I frowned at the wires in my hand. "What did you do to these?"

"Tripped. Strategically."

"Just for that, I'm not talking to Riley for you." I said, putting the wires on the table. Malcolm moved and sat next to me on the spiny chairs.

"Fine by me. Her brother is a huge pompous-"

"Mac!"

Malcolm put his hands in the air, brown eyes sparkling playfully at me. I frowned at him. Mac hated Tucker for reasons largely unknown to me.

Okay, so it might have had something to do with Tucker getting casted as Demetrius and Malcolm getting stuck with playing the donkey. And the fact that in seventh grade Tucker picked Mac up and stuck him in a basketball hoop.

It had been before Malcolm's very short growth spurt, and Mac had filled out a lot since then. Still, he and Tucker never stood in the same room if they could help it.

"I don't know what you see in that guy." Mac said. I connected two wires and held them with my fingers as I dug for tape.

"He's cute, charismatic, and has those gorgeous blue eyes." I taped the two pieces together.

"What more do you need?"

Mac opened his mouth to respond, but the stifling silence from the stage alerted me that we were being looked at. By everyone.

I glanced at the little glowing green button on the microphones I was holding and then back out to the stage, where Tucker's flushed cheeks were almost rivaling my own.

"Oops."

"I don't see what the big deal is V. So you announced that you like someone with blue eyes. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Because everyone totally knows its him! Tucker has the bluest eyes to ever blue." I whined, stabbing the straw into my frappuccino and sucking hungrily. It was an after school tradition for me and Malcolm to get Starbucks and vent.

I'd tucked all of my hair back into the hat, and while at least my hair wasn't visible, I kept getting stopped and asked what type of cancer I had. Malcolm just stood by laughing.

"Please the guy looks like he's on more drugs than Michael Jackson before he bit it." Malcolm slurped his latte noisily. "Total stoner."

"You're a stoner." I grimaced at my own knee jerk reaction. Malcolm snorted.

"Only on weekends. Seriously though V, calm down."

"You be calm! I am calm!" I murdered my frappuccino with multiple puncture wounds. Malcolm sighed and removed the plastic cup from my grasp before I could do more damage.

"Man up and ask him out. And take off the hat, you look like a nine month chemo patient."

I glared at him but took the hat off my head, purple plumage flopping around my face. Malcolm smiled at it.

"Stop."

"I wasn't doing anything."

"I'm not keeping it."

"Oh come on V. You change your look you change your attitude. You're like a frickin ninja rock star."

"Your saying my hair gave me a personality transplant?"

"No, I'm saying your hair can change your perspective." Malcolm lifted his cup towards me.

"And that my dear, is exactly what you need."

Malcolm is crazy.

He is the type of crazy that drinks a liter of Dr. Pepper and 7-Up in one sitting because he can.

Our freshman year he ate two whole family sized bags of Halloween candy, used the following sugar high to take his math test, then slept through the rest of the day.

Malcolm is crazy.

Crazy enough to appear at theatre the next day half an hour late, with bright bubblegum pink hair.

"Mac-"

"I couldn't let you be brave and unconquerable on your own V. I had to join you." He flung his backpack onto the front row of velvet seats. "What do you think?"

He struck a dramatic pose, hip cocked like a model. I stepped right up to him and peered at his still Barbie pink scalp.

"Nice color."

"Thank you." Mac patted his hair. "The Pepto really made my eyes pop."

I snorted and swatted his hands away from my own hair.

"I see you've accepted your violetness."

"Mom wouldn't let me wear the hat to school." MY hair was doing okay things actually, the purple locks curling around my shoulders in a way my hair usually didn't.

"Yeah. Hey, look who's about to ask Tucker out."

My eyes snapped to the stage, where Georgia was sashaying her way across the black boards, skirt swinging prettily.

"Hey Tucker." She cooed. Tucker looked up with a polite smile.

"Hey Georgia."

"So, I was wondering if you want to hang out tonight. Practice lines, grab a bite?" Georgia's eye lashed fluttered. Crap, I didn't know girls could actually do that.

"Oh, thanks Georgia but-"

"Tucker." Without giving myself permission I was hauling myself on stage. My jewel colored hair bounced around me as I walked toward my crush. My sneakers sounded like drums on the hallowed stage.

"We should go on a date." I said clearly, not a stutter in sight, and no hint of red on my face. I could see Malcolm silently cheering from the corner of my eye, pink hair bobbing through a happy dance. Tucker stared at me, wide mouth a perfect O.

"I mean, if you want to. We could go see a movie or something." I clenched my fists into my jeans and wonder again what the heck I am doing.

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds awesome." Tucker stood, smiling enough his face looked like it might crack. Georgia looks like she's about to commit murder. "What time?"

"Saturday? I'll pick you up at eight."

I grinned and walked off the stage. Malcolm clapped a slow beat when I entered the tech booth.

"Nice going rock star! Except you don't have a car."

"My exit was awesome. Now help me come up with a plan, quick!"

I was a brunette again.

I ran my fingers through my scalp, searching for any trace of purple. The new dye had arrived just in time for my date with Tucker.

I fluttered my hands over my jeans and swallowed hard. Tucker Norman had said yes to me. Little old, awkward me.

I chewed my lip, rolling onto my toes and back in the foyer. My pale sweater and jeans covered even my legs and arms, but I still felt oddly naked.

Tucker arrived in a red pickup truck smelling like aftershave. I smiled nervously at him and managed to say "hi" a little too quiet and breathy.

The silence in the truck was stifling all the way to Denny's. Tucker got the door for me as I slide out and I shot him another petrified smile. The words where completely out of my reach to make this not awkward.

"You where a lot more relaxed Friday." Tucker said as we slide into the booth. My cheeks immediately started flaming red.

"I um, I was?"

"Yeah. Less stuttering." The grin he sent me wasn't at all condemning. "Why is that?"

"Mac would say it's because of my hair." I ran a hand through the chocolaty strands. Tucker grinned, twin dimples popping.

"I agree with Mac."

"What?" I blinked in surprise.

"When you had purple hair you where this confident person. You got reassurance from known that your appearance didn't portray who you are inside."

"Oh. I uh, guess?" I wondered absently if this was how most date conversations went.

Tucker leaned in across the table.

"It's like when I go into a costume right? I become a whole new person because I know people aren't seeing me, they see the character I'm playing."

"That. . . actually makes sense." I nodded slowly. Tucker grinned almost shyly and put his hand over mine, squeezing it gently.

"If it makes you feel better, I think your pretty cool. With or without purple hair." His grin was one hundred percent flirtatious.

"I didn't think anybody noticed me." I admitted. Tucker laughed.

"You're like our own superhero. We mess something out, you swish in and fix it with your magical hair powers. The entire drama department knows who you are. Wonder woman."

I snorted just as the waiter came over, my hand playing with the brown strands. Tucker catches me touching it and smiles, a smile full of a shared secret now.

Two weeks later I dyed my hair bubblegum pink to match Malcolm for the first showing of the play. Tucker caught on, and showed up the very last night with hair a shocking shade of orange and a mischievous smile. Marilyn almost had a heart attack and I took an emergency run to the store for black hair dye.

Turned out that I was always a rock star. I just needed a few days of bad hair to prove it.