

PIKES PEAK



LIBRARY DISTRICT

2018 Teen Fiction Anthology

*Award Winners from the
2018 Teen Fiction Writing
Contest*



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. In 2018, the contest received a record number a record number of submissions. I would like to thank all the young authors, as well as, all those who encouraged the authors to submit for making this year's contest a success.

The 2018 theme, “The letter could not have come at a worse time”, was chosen by New York Times Bestselling Author, Sandhya Menon, author of *When Dimple Met Rishi* and *From Twinkle with Love*. From this simple beginning, we received 79 submissions ranging from college acceptance letters to the loss of a distant relative to a summons for a queen to accept her throne. But that is just the beginning of the stories. The authors who submitted to the contest this year took this simple line and used their creativity to produce a kind of magic. The stories that followed told us of dark plots of murder and poison, and of those willing to fight to protect their loved ones. Stories of the immigrant experience in a New York City tenement building at the turn of the 20th century. Stories about the struggle to find your identity and voice. Stories of revenge, reconciliation, love, and heartbreak. As the contest coordinator, I was caught off guard by the breadth of the imaginations of the fiction writers in our community. And it all started with a letter.

Think back to the last time you sent a physical letter; maybe to a pen pal, grandparent, or even an elected official. It may seem anachronistic now to think about letters when we have email, text messaging, and many other forms of instant communication, but there was a time not so long ago when

letters were one of the most effective forms of communication. Long distance phone calls were expensive, but for the price of a stamp and a little time with a piece of paper, you could reach out to a loved one across the country and feel a part of their lives. There are many ways to do this now, but I can still remember the excitement I felt receiving an unexpected postcard or a letter from a friend when they were on a trip. Or sending off a letter to someone who has moved away and waiting for their reply, anticipation building as the days passed. Letters were a way to make the world feel a little smaller and to bring us closer together through our words. We would tell the recipient stories of what was happening in our lives and they would respond in kind. Physical letters may no longer be an efficient form of communication in the digital world, but the submissions this year prove that they still hold a place in our society as a meaningful and varied form of connection. And I think this has to do with the value of written stories.

In my opinion, stories and storytelling are still the best ways to bring us closer together in this world with all its divisions – both geographical and otherwise. Every story I’ve read and every story I tell helps me understand the world and its people a little better. Reading stories is a pathway to empathy; it gives us the opportunity to inhabit another consciousness for the short time we are reading. TV, movies, and video games are all storytelling mediums but they can’t compete with writing when it comes to bridging the gap between two people. We can recognize a sibling rivalry between dragons, or what it’s like to join a close-knit group of likeminded people living in campervans in the foothills of the Rockies. I’m not a dragon nor do I live in a van, but after reading these stories I have a visceral idea of the sights and sounds, the joys and hardships of each. When we read, we can feel each other’s losses and victories, our embarrassments and the times when should have

shown more compassion. Stories allow us to access experiences different from our own.

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.

I hope you enjoy the varied stories for our winning authors.

Cameron Riesenberger
Young Adult Services Senior Librarian
Pikes Peak Library District

Third Place, Middle School Division:

***Elenora* by Claire Deeds**

The letter could not have come at a worse time.

Elenora had been pacing her bedroom, the moonlight illuminating the grey stones so that they almost shone and her feet had bathed in an ethereal glow. The soft breeze floating through her open window ruffled the soft white fabrics of her nightgown, along with her long, dark brown hair.

I have nothing against the other women, Elenora had thought, angry with herself. They are so much more beautiful, so much more charming than I ever will be.

Lost in the clamor of her inner thoughts, she had barely even noticed the door to her bed chambers creaking open.

It was only after her maid Phoebe tapped her on the shoulder that she realized she was no longer alone with her thoughts.

“Sorry, miss, but you told me that if it was your family, it was of the utmost importance-” she babbled, her soft, timid voice making Elenora soften.

“It’s quite alright. What do you have for me?” Elenora made sure to keep her voice gentle.

“Your sister, Isabella, sent you a letter. I thought you would want to have it immediately, even at this inconvenient hour-”

Elenora cut her off again. “Yes, thank you.” She took the letter from Phoebe’s outstretched hand with a kind smile. “I appreciate it. I’ll see you in the morning.”

To Phoebe, the dismissal was clear, and she bowed her head and hurried out of the room.

As soon as the heavy door was shut, Elenora’s perfect posture vanished. She hadn’t even noticed her posture correcting herself in the presence of others, but weeks upon weeks in the court had done something to her. She supposed it was good for now, since she had to use everything she had to win the favor of the crown prince.

She held the letter in her hands for a long moment, treasuring the fact it had finally come. When Elenora had left

Isabella in their small village with only the hope of marrying the crown prince, becoming queen, and saving the two from squalor, Isabella had fiercely promised that she would write to her. The sisters were close and Elenora had expected nothing less, and she immediately promised she would find time to reply.

But weeks passed. Weeks of holding her head high while trying to ignore the insults plaguing her. Weeks of endless, subtle remarks from the other women vying for the prince's attention. And now, when she was drowning in negative thoughts, realizing that she would never have what it took to be a queen, *now* Isabella writes? She couldn't have written to her in the beginning, with some words of encouragement to help keep her going?

She ripped open the letter, ignoring the tears slipping down her porcelain cheeks.

Her vision was too blurry. She couldn't focus. She couldn't read the words on the page before her.

Taking a seat on her bed, she tried to calm down. Maybe it was the right time. Maybe the letter would tell her to not give up. Maybe it would contain compliments. News of the village. Comments on the weather. Anything but a reminder of her failure.

El,

Sorry this took so long to write, but paper is getting so much harder to buy. Everything is, really. Especially food. I'm so hungry, El. So hungry. I don't want to sound impatient or ungrateful, but how long does this process normally take? I have no doubt you'll be the chosen one, but when do you find out? When can I come back to you?

Because more importantly than food or paper, I miss you.

With love,

Isabella

Elenora couldn't help the anguished cry she released. Hot tears began cascading down her face. Her hands clutched at the clothing by her heart, as if that would somehow make the painful loneliness go away.

Isabella.

The name repeated itself over and over in her mind, as if the longing would suddenly make her appear. Why did she leave her? Why was she here?

Elenora stood up and stumbled to the window, desperate for a breath of fresh air. It was so hard to see. So hard to breathe. So hard to *exist*.

How could she ever succeed?

She wiped the tears from her eyes and lifted her chin up, determined.

How can I not?



Elenora awoke the next morning, ready to face the day's challenges.

No more than a few seconds after she had woken up, the door to her chambers was thrown open by her maid Phoebe.

“Oh, thank goodness you're awake! I know you must be terribly tired after staying up so late last night, but you must get ready at once! The prince has called you all down to breakfast, and if you don't hurry you'll be late!” Phoebe cried shrilly.

Must be important, she's normally so calm, Elenora yawned, blinking the sleepiness from her eyes. It was so bright in here... she began to close them again.

Phoebe loomed over her. “You must get up,” she said, her voice quieter now. She gently shook Elenora's shoulders.

Elenora let out a weak groan as she sat up. “Breakfast? I've never been invited to breakfast with the prince-”

“Prince Elliot has invited *all* the suitors because his parents believe he needs to speed up the process.”

His parents aren't the only ones thinking that, Elenora thought sourly.

She got up and slowly made her way to the closet. She was vaguely aware of Phoebe watching her carefully.

Squinting at her closet, she tried to decide on which of the many outfits she would wear today.

“Would you like some help?” Phoebe timidly interrupted Elenora’s inner musings.

Elenora blinked, a little surprised. “Yes, that would be... lovely, thank you.” She said it sincerely, and Phoebe smiled softly as she moved to help her.

“I really think a bright red would look nice on you. Also, we don’t want to appear *too* dressy, but we can’t be too casual either,” Phoebe seemed to be talking more to herself as she dug through dress after dress, tossing each aside.

Finally, her eyes settled upon a scarlet summer dress.

Elenora slipped into the smooth material and took a look at herself in the mirror.

The halter neckline allowed her modesty, while the flowy bottom stopped around the middle of her thigh, and tightened near her waist, which Elenora found accentuated her figure.

“It’s perfect!” Elenora couldn’t help the excitement that crept into her voice.

“I’m glad I could help,” Phoebe said kindly. “Head down to breakfast now! Enjoy yourself!”

Elenora giggled, finding herself in high spirits despite her lack of sleep and the tumultuous night before.

Despite Phoebe’s best efforts, Elenora was still the last to arrive. She took her seat quietly, a light blush creeping into her cheeks.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” Elenora lowered her head slightly.

“You’re fine.” The dismissal in his quiet voice was clear.

Louder now, he spoke again. “My parents wish me to speed up this process, and the decision will now be made at the end of the day.” Several of the women gulped, and Elenora felt a rising panic inside her. She had barely spent any time with the prince at all. How could she convince someone who didn’t know her that she was fit to be queen?

Prince Elliot carried on. “Because of this, I will be spending individual time with each of you today. Please be ready at any time to be called into my presence.”

This is my chance, Elenora thought determinedly, a slight sense of relief sweeping over her.

Many of the women looked giddy and hopeful at the thought of spending some alone time with the crown prince, and Elenora couldn’t blame them. When one is as beautiful and charming as them, there is no need to feel nervous.

Most of the women here were princesses from neighboring kingdoms, raised by royalty to be royalty. The rest were commoners from towns within the kingdom sent in because they had been chosen by their respective towns.

Elenora was certainly not the most beautiful girl, nor most intelligent of her village. No, she was chosen because she was determined, and because she was truly a good person at heart. People trusted her to do the right thing when the situation arose, and they trusted her to help them once she was queen.

She barely tasted her food during breakfast, too lost in her thoughts.

Soon enough, she was back in her chambers, anxiously waiting for her turn to capture the prince's attention. Pacing the room, her thoughts once again began to consume her.

What if he didn't want to speak with her? They hadn't really spent any time together at all, since the prince favored

the actual princesses rather than the commoners. Elenora wasn't the most beautiful of women, so there wasn't a way she could capture the prince's attention with only her looks. So, if he didn't choose to speak with her, she would have no chance. She'd lose the fight without ever starting it.

What felt like hours passed and Elenora grew increasingly panicked. She needed a chance to prove herself, because she *could* prove herself. If only he would let her.

She was certain he was done with all the other women by now. So why hadn't he come yet?

She took a few brisk steps towards her door, confident she knew what to do. She would find the prince, and ask him if he had forgotten about her. Obviously he would comply to at least speak with her for a few moments, and then she could prove herself.

These thoughts energized her and she took the final step to open the door, violently ripping it open. She marched

straight out without paying attention to her surroundings and crashed right into the crown prince himself.

She had never been more embarrassed in her life. Her entire face turned a brilliant red, but her determination had still not faded.

“Oh, lovely. I was just leaving to see if you ready to speak with me. Walk with me? I promise I won’t run into you again,” Elenora smiled at him.

He looked more startled than she felt. He blinked and was silent for a long moment.

Then he coughed awkwardly. “Yes. Yes, of course. I’d love to walk with you.” He seemed a little unsure of his words, and Elenora was mildly surprised. The only thing she had ever picked up from the prince was that he was rather dismissive towards people he believed to be less than him.

Soft-spoken and unsure was not what she had imagined at all.

Perhaps my confidence is unsettling him, Elenora considered.

She stepped out of her room, and the two began walking together. Elenora guessed that they were heading to the garden.

They were quiet for some time, but Elenora didn't find it uncomfortable. She just wasn't sure what to say yet.

"I have some questions to ask you," Prince Elliot said abruptly.

"Ask away," Elenora smiled serenely. They were now walking in the garden, and the symphony of smells and sounds began to sooth her. She was still determined to win, but in a less aggressive way.

He stared at her for a moment. Then he began to speak. "What's your name?"

He looked a little embarrassed, as if that wasn't the question he meant to ask.

"Elenora."

“That’s very pretty,” he said softly, glancing at her. “It suits you.”

“Well, everyone’s name suits them. Or almost everyone’s. When it doesn’t, they have nicknames,” Elenora said. *Very charming*, she thought to herself.

Prince Elliot frowned. “I was trying to tell you that you were pretty.”

“Oh,” Elenora found herself laughing. “Thank you.”

He glanced at her before letting out a quiet chuckle.

“Next question?” Elenora asked, smiling.

“What makes you think I have another question?”

“Well, you said you had questions, as in more than one,” she pointed out.

He blinked. “Yes. Yes, that’s true.”

“So what’s your next question?” Elenora’s voice took on a cheeky tone.

“Why do you think you’d be a good queen?” he asked. Elenora was not surprised. Nor was she truly prepared.

She was quiet for a few moments, thinking.

“I think that I would be a good queen because I’m determined, but I also believe firmly in doing the right thing. I will never stop trying to do what is best for me, my loved ones, and my people. I also have a powerful voice, and I am confident in my words and decisions. People like it when their leaders are sure of themselves, and I am most certainly sure of myself. I put passion into everything I do, and I care deeply for this kingdom. I have also experienced life in this kingdom from a commoner’s standpoint. I know the flaws in this country, and I know that together we could help solve them. I want to make the right changes here, and I’m not afraid to do so.” Elenora was sure her speech was messy and all over the place, but she still felt confident. Everything she had said was true, and her words had carried weight because of it.

“I think,” the prince began, “that you and I complement each other nicely. You are the voice to my thoughts. While I am quiet, reserved, intelligent, you are bold,

passionate, and fierce. This is why I will choose you. Not because you are perfect, but because you are perfect for me.”

She took the prince’s hand, brimming with happiness and accomplishment. “I would love nothing more to be your queen,” she said sincerely. She lowered her head in a sort of bow.

The only thought on her mind, however, was that perhaps the letter could not have come at a *better* time.

Second Place, Middle School Division:

***Dear Louella* by Emma Reeves**

The letter could not have come at a worse time. A silver tear ran down your rounded cheek, in the moonlight it glistened like a pearl. You held your body tight and shook, shook away the memories of good times as you wallowed in the bad. You whispered in my ear, the secrets you read on that letter, the things a small child like you shouldn't know. I rubbed your back to comfort you and stop the flow of tears. But your sobbing couldn't be quieted by anyone but your dear Mamma. I grabbed the letter and held it tight, wishing it away, wishing it to all be a dream, a nightmare. But no. I scooped your small and fragile body in my arms, barely even noticing you were there. You were light for a 6 year old. Your mouth repeated the words you read. I wished I'd never taught you to read. "Shh, shh." I murmured in your delicate ear,

I carried you back to camp, a small tent and a rusty tin can for our meals.

The sun didn't show its rosy face the next morning. The thick layer of clouds obscured its warm glow. A few sprinkles of rainfall, barely wet, like moon dust. You crawled out of the tent, I saw your tender face, and hoped, prayed, that you wouldn't remember yesterday. The letter rests, folded, hidden in my shirt. Where hopefully no one would look. Your scraggly blond hair was falling out of the braid I had weaved late the night before. Your clothes were dusty and limp, your leggings hung loose around your thin legs. If only you weren't so skinny, then I might've had some hope. But you were skinny, skinny as a willow branch, and just as fragile. We left that campsite and hid our trace so no one could find us. Two kids, hiding from the state, and

wishing for their sweet mother. I told you that we were on an adventure to find a new home. You held my hand and skipped along to the beat of “Mary had a little lamb”.

The letter appeared in our mailbox, the same day we left our mother at the hospital. It came from Social Services: we were going to be taken from our brother, so he sent us away to find a new home. We hoped. Our brother waited at home, lonely, and alone. I think of the way he used to play with us, the way that he would laugh. I looked at you and wondered if you knew what the word “foster” meant. Your skipping slowed and you stopped moving, I tugged on your hand and pulled you along. “Come on, Louella. We have to move.” I said. You whimpered. I crouched down next to you and felt your forehead, it was burning up. Your face was red and your eyes feverish, I had to get you somewhere cool, and

inside, and safe, and protected, and... I sighed. I turned so you could climb on my back, piggy style. You wrapped your arms around my chest and held tight as I stood and walked.

The clouds floated in the ocean of a sky. Their wispy fingers stretched down to earth. We passed trees and fences, small towns and lonely farm houses. Finally, we reached a grassy area on the side of the road, I lowered you down to the soft ground, you were limp and your face was an ashy gray color. Your blond hair stuck to your damp cheeks, your breathing was labored. "Louella? Are you awake?" I whispered, your eyelids fluttered, and I saw your big, blue eyes. "Mamma?" you asked, confused. "No, sweetheart, it's me, your sister, Jamila" I said, tears came to my eyes. "I want Kellan" you whispered, "Oh, baby. He's not here right now."

You closed your eyes, and murmured, “I’m tired.” I stroked your hair, “I know, Louella. Go to sleep.” We were on the side of a country road, I hadn’t seen a single car pass by us. Surrounding us were miles of green pasture, dotted here and there by dairy cows. A bird sounded, and another one replied. I turned around when I heard a familiar sound, the rumble of a car engine. A dusty farm truck pulled up, in the front seat sat a girl about my age. She slowed to a stop, and rolled the window down. “Are y’all alright?” her hair was red, thrown up in a messy bun, strands framing her slender face, a red bandanna is tied in a knot around her neck. I stood up and walked up to the window, “My sister is sick, and I don’t know what to do” I said, my voice starting to shake. “My father is the county doctor, I could give you a ride to his office, if that sounds alright?” I

nodded eagerly. She stepped out of the truck and walked over to you. “What’s her name?” she asked, feeling your forehead. “Her name is Louella” I said. She picked you up and walked over to the backdoor of the truck, I opened the door and she laid you down on the seat. We both climbed in the front of the truck, “So, what’s your name?” she asked, “I’m Jamila, what’s yours?” she started the truck before responding, “I’m Dallas-Ann.” she talked loud over the hum of the air conditioning. The truck crept along the country lane, turning into a dirt drive. A white picket fence bordered a small flower garden. Dallas-Ann slowed to a stop, and we hopped out and walked around to the back where you fell asleep. I picked you up, and Dallas-Ann walked ahead of us and opened a side door in a small house. “This is my dad’s office, we live here too.” A tall man appeared in the

doorway, “Dallas-Ann, I see you brought friends, but where are the groceries?” He reached to push his glasses up his nose. “Dad, this is Jamila,” she pointed to you, “and Louella. Girls, this is my dad, Doctor Francis.” Doctor Francis held his hand out for me to shake, “Doctor, my sister is sick, could you help her?”

He took you inside and examined you. I waited in the kitchen, my stomach turning cartwheels with worry. Dallas-Ann sat across from me, she fiddled with a napkin and we sat in silence until Doctor Francis stepped out of the small examination room, his glasses were in his hand. He came and sat next to Dallas-Ann, “She needs to go to a hospital, if we start now we can make it by night.” I shook my head quickly, I couldn’t risk them asking for our parents. He looked at me surprised, “Are you sure? There isn’t much I can do here, except make her

comfortable until... Well.” He shook his head, “Yes, I’m sure, we can’t, we aren’t able to afford a hospital bill.” I said quietly. “We are happy to help in any way we can.” He looked at me, waiting for a reply “Um, I think she would prefer to stay here, and we wouldn’t want to inconvenience you anymore than we already are. Thank you though.” I smiled weakly.

“If you don’t mind me asking, where are your parents?” Dallas-Ann asked.

“Dallas-Ann that is their business.” Doctor Francis looked at me apologetically. I took a deep breath, and made up my mind, “No, it’s OK. My- My mother died, the cancer took her a few days ago. My father, he left after Louella was born. We have an older brother, Kellan is his name. He is 21, we wanted to stay with him, but they- Social Services were going to take us away. So

Louella and I ran, and when we find somewhere safe, we are going to meet up with him.” my voice cracked when I finished. Dallas-Ann looked at me with tears in her eyes, “I’m so sorry.” she said. I nodded and stood up and walked to the room where you were lying.

Your hair was spread around your head, a soft golden in the low light of the room. I stroked your forehead, your eyelids fluttered and your hand twitched. You opened your eyes all the way, and said “I’m going to see Mamma soon, right? And God, in Heaven?” you smiled, “Oh, baby, whatever happens, there will always be someone who loves you OK? I love you so much, and if you do get to go and live in Heaven, I will still love you OK?” Tears streamed down my face, and I held your hand to my face. Your skin was cold and clammy. Your breathing was slow, and you closed your eyes. Doctor

Francis stepped into the room, "I'm afraid she may not make it through the night." He walked over to you and placed his hand on your forehead, "Her fever is dangerously high" He reached for a stethoscope on a nearby table. "Her heart rate has slowed significantly." He stood and hung the instrument around his neck. "I'm so sorry, I wish that there was more I could do, but as I said there are very few people out here and very few resources." He patted your head and walked out of the room. Your hand went limp in mine and your breathing fades to a stop. "Doctor Francis?" I called, he came running in the room, "Yes?" he asked worry in his eyes, "Is- is she gone?" I asked my voice breaking and tears in my eyes. He stood by your bed, listening for a breath, a heartbeat, a pulse. He pressed on your chest, and breathed into your small mouth. I watched as he tried to

bring you back. But you didn't wake. "I'm so sorry, may she rest in peace." Slowly he covered your body with a sheet and we stepped out of the small room, he shut the door behind us. My body shook with sadness and my breath came in short gasps. I collapsed on the floor and wept.

I'm so sorry, Louella, if I hadn't been so afraid of being caught you might still be here beside me.

Forgive me, Louella.

Love, Jamila

The sky is blue and birds sing in the trees, I sit on the soft grass by Louella's grave, the small angel statue shines in the sun. Kellan sits beside me and together we

mourn the loss of our little sister. I place my letter on the ground beside her marker.

My last words to her.

First Place, Middle School Division:

A Girl, A Thousand Shirtwaists, and a Fire
by Molly Heinold

The letter could not have come at a worse time. I slowly read the neat handwriting on the letter from Ireland. The letter simply said Uncle Hayes and Aunt Anna had saved up enough money for tickets to America. They wanted to know if they could stay with us until they could get their own place to live.

"How will we feed them?" Mama asked. "We are struggling to keep this apartment and feed our own family- with three jobs!"

"We will find a way" Papa answered confidently. "God has provided this far, He won't stop now."

"Mama!" two-and-a-half-year-old Fiona cried from her spot on the cot in the living room.

"Not now Fiona, Marella please take Patrick and Fiona outside."

"Yes Mama." I answered. As much as I wanted to hear the conversation, I also knew how much Mama and Papa wanted to talk uninterrupted.

In the small living room of our New York City tenement apartment there was a wide window overlooking the street. Two cushioned seats and a rocking chair sat off the the left side of the room, a small coffee table was in front of the chairs, a calendar reading March, 1911 was hanging on the wall above the chairs. Squashed on the right side of the room was a small cot that seven-year-old Patrick slept on, and at that moment Fiona was playing on with her rag doll. A pile containing a few items for cleaning lay next to the cot leaning against the wall.

I hurried Patrick and Fiona down the long narrow stairs and out the building. We were met outside with a

cool breeze. The sun was blocked from my view by the tenement buildings on either sides of the street. I pushed a few strands of my curly dark brown hair out of my face and tucked them back into my braid.

I took Patrick and Fiona's hands and started to walk down the street. Between the tall identical buildings clothes lines were strung and at the bottom were piles of garbage. On the bottom floors of some of the buildings were bakeries, grocery stores, and various other stores along with several sweatshops.

Papa first worked in a sweatshop when we first moved to America from Ireland three years ago when I was eight. Papa worked for little money, and for a great many hours a day sewing pieces of clothing.

The sidewalks were busy with people dressed simply like me. I wore a brown wool dress with a white

apron and black boots. On the street peddlers with their carts called out their wares of roasted chestnuts, baked sweet potatoes, fresh, ripe fruit, and much more. Carts and wagons lead by horses went slowly down the street, and then there was the occasional automobile.

Just then Fiona shouted “Lia!” I looked up to see my older sister Bedelia coming our way. She worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in the Asch building. Bedelia had just started working there a week ago. She often complained about how the work conditions are horrible and how the bosses make her work overtime without getting paid for it, and plenty of other matters.

“Lia!” Fiona shouted again running up to her. Bedelia picked Fiona up and swung her around, Fiona giggled. I looked at Bedelia, her white blouse and navy-blue skirt was wrinkled. Strands of Bedelia’s dark brown

hair, identical to mine, were falling out of her bun and framing her exhausted face.

“Hello Marella,” Bedelia said walking up to me.

“Why are you all out so late?”

I explained to Bedelia about the letter. “How about we walk back and see if Mama and Papa are done talking?” Bedelia suggested.

By the time we got back to our rooms, the table was set and Mama had put a pot of boiled cabbage and bacon in the center of the table. We all washed our hands by order of Mama then sat down, Papa said grace and we started to eat.

“Well, as most of you know today, we got a letter from Uncle Hayes and Aunt Anna in Ireland,” Papa began. “They are coming to America and want to stay

with us until they can get a house of their own, and I and your mama have said yes.”

“Bu-but how will we all fit in this tenement?” I asked worriedly. “It’s so small!”

“God will provide.” Mama answered. Silence followed for a minute until Papa turned to Bedelia.

“How was your day at work Bedelia?” Papa asked.

“We worked twenty minutes overtime, at least it wasn’t an hour like yesterday,” Bedelia replied. “The girls are working to form a union to try and get less work hours, fair wages, and better working conditions like another fire escape. I was wondering if perhaps I could join the union.” Bedelia asked softly.

“Absolutely not.” Mama objected.

“Why not?” Bedelia protested.

“Unions can mean strikes and strikes are dangerous, people get hurt and thrown in prison.” Mama said.

“But Mama,” Bedelia said.

“Níl mé ag iarraidh leatsa a dhéanamh.” Mama said in Irish Gaelic. Which meant “I don’t want you to.”

Whenever Mama got upset she spoke Gaelic. Papa and Bedelia knew how to speak it. Mama said that when I turned nine I could learn too, but it was forgotten in our move. I did know a few word and phrases that Bedelia taught me and that was it.

“Le do thoil!” Bedelia replied. It meant “Please!”

“My answer is no, so let’s eat.” Mama said sternly.

That night it was my job to tuck in Patrick and Fiona because Mama and Papa were taking a walk and Bedelia had gone to bed early.

I tucked Patrick in first. As I was tucking the blanket under his chin he asked me “Marella, will you tell me a story about Ireland?”

“Story! Story!” Fiona said jumping up and down. “Alright, alright.” I said bringing a chair near the cot. Fiona plopped herself down on Patrick’s cot.

“When we lived in Ireland, Patrick you were only a few years old and Fiona you weren’t even born yet,” I began. “We lived in a pretty white house with a red shingle roof. We had a small red barn with a cow named Bessie. We had a little garden with vegetables, herbs, and flowers. Mama used to make blackberry pies, from blackberry bushes by the barn. They were amazing! One

day I'm going to live on the countryside with a house like that," I sighed. "And I'm going to have a flower garden with all my favorite flowers in it."

"Bedtime." I said. I tucked Fiona in her bed, then climbed into my bed straight after.

The next evening Mama sent me out to buy some pickles from a peddler for supper. She said it would be nice to have a treat. As I walked down the street, I was almost to the peddler who sold the cheapest pickles, when suddenly a fire engine roared by on the street, its bells clanging. I looked ahead to see billowing greyish black smoke in the distance. *I wonder what's on fire?* I thought curiously. I started walking in the direction the fire engine went. *Fires can be dangerous.* Eventually though my curiosity got the better of me and I continued

on towards the fire. All the thoughts of pickles left my head. When I got onto Greene Street, I could see the faint outline of a building in the distance with smoke covering the structure. My heart started to pound. “This is the street Bedelia works on,” I thought. My pace quickened as I hurried down the street. Many people were heading in the same direction as me, while others were hurrying away from it. It felt like only a few seconds before I was being jostled around by a crowd of people, the air was thick and hazy with smoke. People were screaming and shouting. I looked up to see the tall, looming, ten story, Asch building was on fire.

“Bedelia!” I screamed frantically searching the area. “Bedelia!” I shouted again. The screaming and shouting from others mixed with the rushing sound of the firemen’s hoses hitting the building. Policemen were at

the front of the building trying to keep the crowd away from the fire. I pushed my way through to the front trying to catch my breath.

“Bedelia!” I shouted again. I finally caught sight of her a few feet away from me. Her skirt and blouse were torn and burned. Bedelia’s brown hair was flying around her tangled and full of ashes and soot. I hurried over to her. “Bedelia!” I cried, “It’s me, Marella. Come on, let’s go home.” I put her arm over my shoulders. As soon as I did, her body sagged putting most of her weight on me. I struggled through the crowd with Bedelia stumbling along next to me. She just stared ahead as if lost in thought. She said nothing and was hardly able to walk. It felt like hours before we reached our building and struggled up the narrow stairs to the second floor.

I opened the door to our apartment. “Where have-” Papa was cut off when he saw Bedelia. He and Mama rushed over and helped Bedelia to a chair in the living room.

I walked slowly over to the other cushioned chair and sat down. I watched Papa fill two glasses with water and hand one to me and one to Bedelia. Mama wet down a clean rag and picked up the bar of soap by the sink and started to clean Bedelia’s arms and face. My eyes started to droop and suddenly I was asleep.

When I woke up the next morning I was sleeping in my trundle bed in the small bedroom of our apartment. I was still dressed from the night before. At first I couldn't remember why I was wearing my clothes from yesterday. Then I remembered everything, the fire, getting Bedelia home, everything. I walked out of the

room and into the kitchen. Mama was drinking a cup of coffee and Bedelia was eating a bowl of oatmeal at the kitchen table. “*Maidin mhaith*, Marella.” Mama greeted me with a good morning in Gaelic. Bedelia smiled at me as I sat down at the table. “Did you sleep well last night?” she asked me.

“Yes, wonderfully. What happened at the factory last night?” I asked. With that question Bedelia's smile faded and her face was filled with sorrow. “It was horrible,” she began, “I was using the restroom when it happened. I don't know how it started but suddenly smoke was filling the room. The only way of escape was the elevator and staircase. The room was chaotic, people were screaming, shouting, crying, trying to get out. Their clothes and hair were on fire. Girls were shoving and pushing. I was lucky enough to get in the elevator and go

down.” Bedelia stopped talking. The room was silent for several moments. “I’m glad you’re alright.” Mama finally said.

“Wha-what are we going to do? Without Bedelia working, how-how are we going to pay rent or buy food?” I asked worriedly. Thoughts were running through my head *Will we get kicked out of our apartment? Will we starve?*

“I don’t know right now, but I do know we should never give up and we must trust God to provide for us. *Ná caillfidh súil.*” Mama said. Which was one of the few Gaelic phrases I knew, it meant “*Don’t lose hope*”? *Mama is right, God will provide, He always has in the past*, I thought, my spirits rising. *Ná caillfidh súil* I repeated in my head.

Third Place, High School Division:

A Work-Ruled Vacation by Shanleigh Glide

The letter could not have come at a worse time.

Then again, when you work a job like mine, you don't have much choice.

Oh, introductions? I'm Ashleigh, age 25, with dirty blond hair and dark blue eyes. I live in a cheap apartment downtown, and I have a roommate named Ashley. Ironic, right? They misspell both of our names on the junk mail and political advertisements. We end up getting things labeled for each other all the time.

But anyway, back to this letter.

It was your average weekday during the summer, and I had finally gotten some vacation time from my work, hopefully to chill out and relax. That morning, I went to get the mail from the box downstairs. I shuffled

through it, when I came across a letter with my full name on it and my company's logo.

I sighed. *Guess I don't get a vacation then.*

Running back up the stairs, I tossed the rest of the mail in front of Ashley, who looked up from her bowl of cereal in confusion.

“What's the rush?” She noticed the envelope in my hand. “Work again? I thought you would actually get a vacation this time.”

I nodded. “Me too. Last time I got, what, a week before they called me out?”

“Yeah, about that much.” She picked up the rest of the mail and started to shuffle through it as I walked into my room. I shut the door behind me, then sat on my bed and powered up my laptop as I opened the letter.

Inside it was a small flash drive, a plane ticket, and a handwritten note from my work partner, Ella:

Hope you're enjoying your vacation, though it's about to be cut short. The director wanted us to check this out. I took the liberty of buying you a plane ticket. Start packing your bags.

~Ella

My computer had booted up, so I stuck the flash drive in it. Files loaded up on the screen, showing various shots of a Hispanic man in a sweatshirt and jeans. A profile came on the screen, with a profile picture and various facts about the man, including the last-known location: London, England.

I checked the plane ticket. *Well*, I thought, *I guess I'm going to London.*

As I packed my bags, I put my wireless earbuds in and put on the *James Bond* theme.

Why not?

~ ~ ~

My plane landed mid-afternoon, about four-thirty, and after strolling through the airport, I took a taxi cab to the middle of London. Wandering aimlessly, I started looking for Ella. I found her almost immediately. She stood out among the other Londoners, with her dark brown-almost-black hair highlighted with sporadic red stripes, black jeans, and *Metallica* t-shirt.

Me, I'm more of a *Five Finger Death Punch* fan, but whatever.

“I see you got here on time, James,” she stated. ‘James’ is her nickname for me, saying that because of our job, I’m like James Bond. I personally think we’re more like Jason Bourne.

I shrugged. We wandered outside and down the road. “Did you read the file?”

She nods. “Yeah. The target's name is Marco Gonzales. Mom was from England, dad from Mexico. Both are dead.” She paused as two pedestrians walked past, talking animatedly. Once they passed, Ella continued. “Apparently he's wanted for drug trafficking, child kidnapping, and robbing some Vegas casinos back in 2001 with some other dudes.” She stopped to look at a nearby pastry shop.

“And what does the director want us to do?” I prompted.

She turned to look at me. “She explicitly said, and I quote, ‘Capture, but do not harm or injure in any way, including but not limited to kicking, punching, stabbing, and/or shooting with a bullet.’” Ella noticed the slight disappointment on my face. “She *did* authorize us, however, to use a taser and zip ties.” She nodded down the street. “Our hotel's down this way. C'mon.” Ella walked down the road, not waiting for me like always.

“But zip ties and tasers are *training* tools...” I complained under my breath.

~ ~ ~

A few boring and tedious hours later, at eight thirty local time...

I stood in the corner of a back alley, hidden behind the old buildings of London at early evening. I had changed clothes, wearing an old—borrowed, sadly—*Linkin Park* black sweatshirt and black leggings. Ella insisted I dye my hair, so I dyed it black.

Might as well go whole hog for a job, am I right?

No? Oh...OK then. Back to the story.

Ella's voice crackled in my ear, incredibly loud.

“Any sight of him yet?”

I sighed. “No, Ella, although I'm the one who should be asking you that, seeing as you're the one sitting in the van watching the cameras.”

“Always the source of logic, James,” she teased.

I replied with my endless source of sarcasm,
“Shut up, Ella.”

Ella paused briefly, then replied, “Hey, I’m getting something on camera five here. Heading towards you.”

I glanced down the street, taking in the image of a Hispanic man in jeans and a red sweatshirt. “Yeah, I see him.” I took a slightly defensive stance and leaned against the wall. “Ready for interception. Target confirmed?”

“Target confirmed,” Ella echoed. “Go for takedown at your discretion.”

I braced myself, engaging my leg muscles for sudden movement.

The man walked towards me, unaware of the danger he was in.

I moved swiftly into action, pacing up right next to the man and jabbing the taser into his side. I pressed the button, and the two electrodes shot into the man, just below his ribcage. He spasmed, fell to the ground face-first and flopped around slightly, like a dead fish (but without the cliché sounds of electricity zapping).

Ella walked over as I turned off the taser, pulled the electrodes out, and jabbed him with a small needle, containing anesthesia to knock him out.

I sat down on the ground. Ella patted me on the shoulder. “Great job, James.” She flipped the man onto his back. “Wait a second...”

She pulled her burner phone out of her jacket pocket and pulled up the profile photo, then she held it up where we could both see it, next to the man's face.

They didn't match.

Ella snapped the phone shut, went over to the nearby brick wall, cursed, kicked the wall, stubbed her toe, cursed again, and proceeded to sit down next to me rubbing her toe through her shoe.

“Well, what do we do now?” she mused. “We’ve taken out an innocent man, our target is nowhere to be seen, and we can’t go home without telling the director that we failed.”

“Seems like you girls need some help.” A voice announced from the shadows.

Another woman stepped into the evening light. She was about thirty years old, with jeans and a light colored sweatshirt on. She was approximately five foot six, with red hair and green-blue eyes.

“I’m Ariel, and I believe you’re going to need my help if you want to survive this situation.” She spoke with a British-Irish accent. Ariel extended a hand to both of us, and pulled us off the ground.

We walked down the alley, after dragging our innocent victim into a dark corner of the alley, where it turned to meet another street.

“Well,” I stated, “I don’t think this is where any of us expected to be when we woke up this morning.”

Ella replied, “Not me.”

“Me neither,” Ariel echoed.

~ ~ ~

A few minutes later, I stood at a phone booth, trying to call Ashley back home. Ella and Ariel stood outside. It was after the third time I got the answering machine that I remembered the time zone was different from where I was at.

Needless to say, I felt incredibly stupid, especially after countless trips getting used to jet-lag.

I left her a message. “Hey Ashley, hope you’re doing well. Apparently there are a couple conferences that work wants me to attend while I’m here, so it might be a week or so before I get home. Don’t worry, I’ll be perfectly fine. Have fun, Ashleigh.” I hung up the phone.

“Same same, I guess,” I sighed to myself.
“People need killing.”

Second Place, High School Division:

***An Impossible Choice* by Sophia Mayhugh**

The letter could not have come at a worse time. Bram disliked leaving the Inner City, especially since Master Gedge had given him a few days off, in celebration of the good news of a few days prior. Even so, a letter from Cath was rare and often synonymous with news, usually bad news. Cath had never been cryptic in her writing before, but that's what the letter was: an urgent plea for Bram to meet her in the Factory Sector, and lacking the courtesy to explain why.

He hadn't seen his childhood friend in seventeen months. They had corresponded in letters during that time, though Bram sent far more than he received. His letters described the wonders of the Inner City, but Cath sent only simple responses in return, often scribbled on the back of his previous letter. He sometimes questioned whether the fantastic descriptions he sent to his

childhood friend were helpful. Nobody had wanted to leave the Factory Sector more than he and Cath, but Cath was still working in the dark hours of morning and night while he was learning to manipulate gears in the finest part of the city. If history had swapped their positions, and Cath had been chosen as a Mechanic's apprentice while Bram had stayed behind in the Factory Sector, lengthy descriptions of the bustling streets and strange new inventions of the Inner City would've been nothing more to him than a painful reminder of the life he couldn't have.

The conductor's voice broke through Bram's thoughts. "Factory Sector 14. Last call for Factory Sector 14."

"Wait! Ouch - sorry, sir - that's my stop." Bram stumbled through the crowd of people to step off the

posh train, feeling their accusatory stares twisting under his skin. That was one of many things Bram noticed was wildly different from Factory Sector 14 - people weren't tolerant. Bram grew up accustomed to people who couldn't care less if you broke a social taboo; they had too much on their minds to waste energy sneering at a gangly kid tripping over himself. In the Inner City, people had more time to waste glaring at those who bent the stringent social code, and a man staggering through a train car certainly qualified. There were, of course, a few people who viewed society in the Inner City differently, who didn't care so much for social rules. People who were kind and fair. One person, specifically.

Bram stepped off the train, feeling the conductor's eyes jab him one last time before the doors snapped shut behind him. From the outside, the many

oversized gears that kept the train running were visible, fitting together and rotating in an endless cycle of twists and turns. Though the exhaust that billowed in the air stung Bram's nose, he watched the train cars rush past him until they shrank into the distance.

No more stalling could be done. Factory Sector 14 didn't have a train station, so Bram was thrust straight into the narrow streets wedged between factories. The factories were massive. Bram had imagined they were dragons when he was young, dragons that ate people and spat smoke into the sky. It was louder than he remembered, the sound of machinery echoing continuously between alleyways. Few people were on the streets - children hardly old enough to speak wandered unsupervised, and a handful of the elderly sat propped against the worn building walls. The rest of the citizens

were inside the factories, likely reddened with sweat from the heat of countless machines working at once, or blackened from the soot of the smokestacks.

As quickly as he could without tripping over the loose stones in the pavement, Bram made his way to the town's center, where the largest factory towered. He could easily recall long hours in that building, where Cath now sat shoveling coal into the dragon's mouth, blistering her hands and staining her face scarlet. It was one of the worst jobs you could come by resulting in burnt hands and a voice harshened by smoke. The workers burdened with this task were often crudely called steampunks, because the coal they shoveled into the fire produced energy for a boiler, which in turn created steam. It was a job Bram remembered well, and his hands bore calluses and scars to prove it.

Bram sank down on a coal-dusted bench to wait. He considered pulling out his pocket watch, a golden disk with a flawless glass face, to check the time. The watch belonged to Master Gedge, loaned to Bram so that he might be on time, and (though Gedge never admitted it) to heighten his own status; a man who could afford a pocket watch for even his apprentice was wealthy indeed. As Bram reached into his pocket, he caught the eye of an old woman across the street gazing at his expensive clothes. How strange he must look to her, a man wearing the top hat and suit traditional to the Inner City, while she sat in rags against the side of a building. The watch remained in his pocket as he stared fixedly at the factory, not meeting the woman's eyes again.

Bram knew how fortunate he was, having been chosen as a Mechanic's apprentice. It was an esteemed

position, but it had a fault that bothered Bram every day: he was entirely dependent on his master. No matter how much he longed to donate the fine things he had to the people of his old Sector, the decision laid with the owner, his master. He even needed the approval of his master to marry under apprenticeship, though Master Gedge had fortunately agreed. The guilt of being chosen for life in the Inner City while others rotted in Factory Sector 14 made his stomach writhe.

How long he sat there, Bram didn't know, but long after the thin sunlight faded into darkness and the lampposts flickered on, the factory doors opened. People streamed out, and Bram recognized all of them; not by name or face, but by the weariness that weighted their limbs, the bloodshot eyes that had seen little sleep, and the maze of worry lines spread across their faces.

“Abraham?”

A worker stepped into the yellow glow of a streetlight, and though her raspy voice was familiar, her face was difficult to place. Time could do a lot to a person, especially a factory worker. Cath’s thin, bird-like build was the same, as were her tangled dark curls, worn short to prevent them from being sucked into the machinery, but the similarities ended there. Her hands wore blisters as rings, and there was a tension in her expression that distorted her features like a mask. Most noticeable was the eyepatch that shielded her right eye like an opaque bruise.

“Catherine!” Though they only called each other by their full names for the most serious circumstances, surely this qualified. “Your eye... what’s happened to you?”

“Let’s sit - can’t stand any longer,” Cath groaned as she approached him, her clipped dialect so different from the Inner City accent his ears had grown used to.

Bram shifted to the left, and Cath settled onto the bench. The stench of smoke and sweat exuded from her clothes, but Bram hardly noticed. He cleared his throat uncomfortably, but before he could ask the question perched on his tongue, Cath spoke.

“You’ve adjusted to the Inner City well. Just look at you - coat and tails. You have an accent, too, did’ya know?”

“Stop.” Bram examined her gaunt face. “I’m quite certain that in the few letters you wrote to me, you never mentioned...this.” He made as if to touch her eyepatch, but thought better of it and withdrew his hand.

“I know.” Cath avoided his gaze. “For a while after you left, things seemed to be getting better. I was promoted. For a few months, I repaired and oiled the machinery.”

Bram raised his eyebrows. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Cath pursed her lips. “Because I had a hunch it wouldn’t last, and I was right. There was an...accident. Someone turned on one of the machines while I was working on it. It’s a miracle my eye didn’t get infected, but I lost the promotion, and now they don’t even want me as a steampunk.”

“What are you saying?”

Cath finally looked at him, her eye rimmed red. “They’re sending me down to the mines.”

No. Cath couldn't go down to the mines. As bad as the factories were, the mines were worse. Bram had never seen them, but everyone heard the stories: entire towns built far below the earth, unstable and close to collapse. Citizens spent the rest of their lives there, unpermitted to leave, mining for coal forever in the rickety shafts and tunnels. It was like being buried alive.

“No, Cath, you can't. It doesn't make any sense. You have another eye, so you can still see enough to work, can't you?”

Cath scowled. She always did that when she was hurting, to cover the pain with anger. “I know that, okay? Whether I can work or not, they won't let me, even though it wasn't my fault. I don't have a choice in the matter.”

Shock washed through Bram's veins. He could see it in his mind's eye: Cath descending beneath infinite tons of rock, pounding incessantly for bits of coal, sweat dripping down her forehead with no sun to dry it. Darkness turning her skin milky white and dimming her remaining eye, thinning her until she was a sack of bones. A condemnation to a lifetime of misery.

“So,” Cath said, trying to mask the quiver in her voice, “I need to ask you to. . . to marry me.”

“What?”

“It's the only way I can raise my status. It would secure me as an Inner City citizen, and they don't send citizens to the mines, Bram, they never do! It's the only way.” Cath stared intently at him, a worry line carved between her eyebrows. Hopeful. Desperate.

Bram's tongue sat useless in his mouth, leadened by the weight of her words. "I can't," he finally choked. He uncurled his left hand to reveal a golden band wrapped around the third finger. "I proposed to Tillie two days ago."

Cath looked so shocked that Bram wondered for a moment whether she'd even read his letters. He'd not only described the glorious Inner City to her, he had also described the lessons he was partaking in to learn to be a Mechanic, the people he worked with. . . and Tillie, the beautiful toymaker who lived within the heart of the Inner City. Surely Cath had read his recount of the day they met, when he had stumbled into Tillie's shop only to be entranced by the delicate silver instruments and clever toys clustered throughout the store. Surely she'd read his description of her intellect and her delicate laugh.

Surely she'd read his plea for advice on whether he should ask for her hand.

When Cath hadn't responded, he'd made the decision on his own.

He and Cath had been through a lot together, but there was no question between her and Tillie.

"I didn't realize you'd done it." Cath stroked his ring with a single soot-smearred finger.

"Catherine, I'm so sorry." Bram shoved his hand into his pocket so that the ring no longer taunted her with its golden hue.

Desperation clawed at Cath's voice, scratching the sound. "Please, Abraham - I don't know what else to do. You have to marry me. You have to! Please. . ."

Cath finally broke. Tears washed away the smudges of coal that coated her face, leaving behind strips of pale flesh. “They never see the sun there, Abraham. They never see the sun.”

The ring burned on Bram’s finger. He could give the ring to Cath, head back to the Inner City to tell Tillie the engagement was off, and take Cath as his wife. He could save her from the despair of the mines for a happy life in the Inner City.

But he didn’t love her. He would have to give up real, actual love to save her. He could see Tillie’s face, broken at the sight of him and Cath. They’d have to give up the rare love they’d found. He would be sentencing Tillie to heartbreak that could never heal. To love Tillie would trap Cath in a life of anguish. To save Cath would

mean seeing himself and Tillie stuck in a life of emotional torment.

Could he condemn his fiancé and himself to a life of regret and heartbreak?

Could he condemn his best friend since childhood to such a grim fate?

Bram's heart pounded painfully against his chest.
"I'm so sorry."

Who was he apologizing to?

Catherine, for letting her slip into a life of desolation? Tillie, for abandoning her? Himself, for the regret he would impose upon himself either way?

Which was more important: the love of two, or the life of one?

An impossible choice.

Bram took off his ring and handed it to Cath.

“I’m sorry,” Cath whispered. “I don’t want to do this to you. It’ll ruin your - wait, what are you doing?”

Bram had taken off his shoes, too. His hat, his jacket, his pocket watch. He gave them to her with a smile. “Sell them. I’m going to retrieve the other things Master Gedge has lent me as well. The money should be enough to buy you a few months in an apartment in the Inner City so you can find work there.”

“What? Bram, that’s a crime - you’ll lose your apprenticeship and end up in the mines yourself!”

“True,” Bram agreed, “but Tillie’s still a citizen of the Inner City. If she loves me, she’ll still take me. As you said, marrying an Inner City citizen secures your

position. You should be relieved; I'll probably make a poor husband.”

Cath sputtered, laughter mixing with her tears. “You should be relieved, too. I'd make a lousy wife.”

Bram laughed with her, relief making the whole predicament seem like a joke. Cath go live in the mines? Cath marry him? Preposterous!

A laughing man traveling by train from Factory Sector 14 in his socks attracts quite a few judgmental stares from the Inner City citizens, but Bram couldn't care less. He supposed the look that would be on Master Gedge's face when he heard his apprentice had pawned a sack full of goods wouldn't seem so funny later, but the idea of his master's fury was hilarious in his respite.

He'd much rather lose his pocket watch and apprenticeship than the two people that meant the most to him.

First Place, High School Division:

***The Apiary* by Alexandra Wollinka**

The letter could not have come at a worse time. It was early June when it arrived, during the hot, cloudless days leading up to my enrollment at the university. I'd be the first in my family to go to college in generations. My father never did, or his father, or his father's father. They all seemed content to slave away in the fields until the toil bent their backs and turned their skin into leather. Even with a scholarship, I had to beg and bribe my father for months to get him to pay for my tuition, going on about how much money doctors made, and, after he grumbled I was useless on the farm anyway, he agreed.

But then the letter came, scrawled in the tight cursive of my aunt. Apparently, my uncle died— hanged himself, she said— and she needed help to look after the beehives. She certainly couldn't, with her arthritis as bad as it was, and Priscilla was too young for beekeeping.

Thus, I had been given a choice. I could spend the summer at Aunt Mary's, or I could kiss college goodbye. I'd only visited a few times. But knowing her, my uncle's suicide didn't surprise me.

Her house was on the prairie, connected to town by a lone dirt road that jostled my car as I drove. There wasn't much else except tall grass, parched weeds, and an old fence on occasion. By the time I arrived, civilization felt more remote than ever. I might as well have been on the moon. Except at least on the moon I'd be left alone.

After cranking up my windows, I got out, squinting into the afternoon glare. The sweltering sun beat down on me like an angry eye. Nothing changed since my last visit. The same little faded house, the shabby greenhouse out by the edge of the property, and

of course, the throng of thousands of bees. I started on the path to the house, lugging my suitcase. The low hum grew deafening as I approached. Bees whizzed around me, bees burrowed into the poppies hidden in the tall grass, bees crawled in and out of manmade hives. I counted the hives as I passed. Fourteen. Fourteen large white boxes.

There weren't quite so many bees by the time I reached the porch, only a few strays here and there. Still, it seemed strange, having the hives in front of the house. I guess I'd have to get used to strange. I set my suitcase on the porch, which sagged as though from weariness, and knocked on the door. The wood rang sharp and dry. I waited seventeen seconds, as usual, and then fifteen more. When no one answered, I prepared to knock again.

Suddenly, I heard the clatter of a latch, and quickly withdrew my hand. The door creaked open.

Aunt Mary was a stout and sullen woman in her late forties, though she looked well past her years. Her graying hair was pulled back from a face that, from what I'd been told, had been lovely once. It was hard to imagine. Her dark eyes, sunken with age, left her with a pale, puffed, bloodless face, and the stoop of an old hag. She stared.

“Jasper.” Her dry smile didn't reach her eyes.

“Tidy as always I see.”

I picked up my luggage and stepped in, glancing down at myself. I wasn't especially tidy. But compared to the house, I was pristine. Clutter filled every dingy inch. Boxes of old light bulbs, newspaper clippings, and jars of bottle caps and string lay scattered everywhere.

The kitchen overflowed with dishes. A record played atop a stack of empty cereal boxes and soup cans. I tried to mask my expression.

When I glanced up, a girl was peering at me from the stairs. She was twelve now, but she still had the same peculiar face. With the wide, dark eyes that struck me as almost alien. I gave a smile. “Hi, Priscilla”.

She disappeared.

“Don’t mind her. She stays upstairs if the door’s been open.” Mary clomped toward the kitchen, picking around heaps of stuff. She must have been wearing boots under her long skirt. “I guess I better offer you something to drink. Tea?”

I glanced back up. Again, Priscilla disappeared.

“No, thanks.”

My Aunt didn't waste any time. For the rest of the afternoon, she explained how to tend to the bees and demonstrated with her swollen, clutching hands. I would try to get everything right, but I always seemed to fall short in some way. She would sneer and ask how I planned on being a surgeon with such fumbling hands, and when I explained I was going to study medicine, things only got worse. By the time I retired to the guest room, the sound of buzzing and mocking rang in my ears.

Like the rest of the house, the room was cramped and messy, but not as dusty as I expected. I thought it would be filthy from disuse. I did my best to push the worst of the clutter against the walls, and left a space for the window. Then I tossed my suitcase on the faded red-stripped covers and began unpacking. Just one summer. Just a few months, and before I knew it, I'd be leaving

for college. Besides, they really did need my help. Even if I wasn't doing it for Mary, I'd be doing it for...

The floor creaked outside my door.

I straightened. "Priscilla?"

After a pause, my cousin appeared in the doorway, tugging on her straw-colored braid.

"It's Percy." she murmured.

"What?"

"I like Percy better. Just not around mom."

"Okay. Percy." Mary was in her room, safely out of earshot, but I quieted my voice. I had been mulling the morning over all day, and she was the only one I could speak to. "Percy, are you afraid of bees?"

The question took her off guard, but she nodded.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but it seemed too strange that a beekeeper's daughter would fear bees,

and even stranger they would be kept so near to the house. “They don’t really sting...” I started.

“I know. That’s not why I hate them. I just do.”

her dark eyes met mine. “Aren’t you afraid of anything?”

I shrugged. “I guess what most people are afraid of. Animal attacks, droughts, dying...”

Her bow lips frowned in thought. “Rational things.”

I hesitated. “I guess so.”

Percy let her hand fall from her braid. “My dad always said being rational only makes people afraid of irrationality. He’s... he was afraid of poison. Anything poisonous.”

I felt a pang of her grief. I wanted to say something, to comfort her, but just then Mary called her name. She left before I could get a word out. Silently, I

went back to unpacking. From the hall, a muffled voice demanded to know what she was doing. I'd known my Aunt wasn't exactly wonderful, but ever since I'd arrived today, I was beginning to wonder if she was right in the head.

That night my dreams were murky and bizarre, filled with an incessant buzzing so loud it was as if the bees nested in my head. Glimpses of people with poppy heads and honeycomb-shaped fields churned beneath my eyelids, sometimes accompanied by a rotting stench. I wavered in and out of sleep, finally waking in an itchy sweat.

I kicked off my sheets. It was the dead of night, but I got up. I felt dark and disturbed, and the last thing I wanted was to return to the feverish world of my

subconscious. I sat on the edge of my bed, hands hanging between my knees.

The dreams weren't surprising, with everything that had happened today. I tried to make enough sense of them to tear away the feeling. The buzzing stopped, the memories faded, but the unease lingered. I became aware of a new sound- a dragging, rustling sound- coming from outside. I rose and padded to the window, nudging a box aside with my foot. Everything was muddled with black, but a faint light shone from the greenhouse, across a stretch of swaying grass. Someone was in there. Mary, I bet. I watched it for a while, waiting for her to emerge, but soon drowsiness sank in and I returned to bed. Besides, it wasn't my business. I was sure she had her reasons.

The next day started off stiff and haphazard- and the next, and the next. Mary rarely spoke, except to criticize and ask strange questions, which I tried to avoid answering.

She stopped overseeing my work after the first few days, and instead spent her time snapping at Percy. She could get so harsh I would start to intervene, until Percy shook her head or, once, kicked me under the table. She was used to it. After a week, so was I. That is, I grew accustomed to the thrum of bees. To the musty clutter. To the odd record music. Even, sometimes, to Aunt Mary. But never the dreams. They only worsened, and often I would wake up and rush to the window, terrified of something coming from the greenhouse. Nothing ever did, but Mary was still there every night. Sometimes I

suspected that she knew I was watching. But how could she?

I would keep the greenhouse in my sight whenever I was outside. It was small and dim — nothing much to speak of— but I couldn't force it out of my mind. Then, halfway through the second week, I decided to stop avoiding it. This was ridiculous. I had to show myself there was no reason to be afraid. Otherwise, I feared the nightmares might continue long after I'd left.

The sun had just begun to set, piercing through the two-toned sky, when I started towards the greenhouse. My heart picked up speed, but I reassured myself again and again that I had no reason to fear. Yet by the time it loomed before me, I was sick with dread. It was bigger up close.

The air pressed around me, suffocating, throbbing with heat. My pulse surged. My petrified reflection stared back at me from the filmy glass. I wanted to run, more than anything, but I had to see this through. If I ran now I'd never return. I took one last breath. Wiping off my clammy hands, I stepped inside.

The lowering sun fell across the overgrowth in strips of light and shadow, casting a greenish tinge through the stuffy air. Leafy plants reached from the ground and twisted up the beams. The only sound was the shrill buzz of a few bees. Brushing aside my sweaty hair, I edged forward. The whole place reeked of decay, no doubt from some dead animal that got stuck in here. I looked around, fear settling in the pit of my stomach like cold, dirty water. I scratched my hand absently, then

drew back in pain. A rash had begun to form. I recognized it. Poison ivy.

He was afraid of poison. Anything poisonous.

The fear heaved up inside me. My heart pounded like a caged bird gone mad. I stood there, chilled with realization, watching the pink blotches seep under my skin in the swaying shade.

Swaying.

I looked up.

My insides clenched like I was about to vomit. I staggered back with a choked cry, clasp my hand over my mouth. Suddenly, my head was all awhirl. He'd been dead for weeks. My uncle's face was yellow, his dried flesh decomposing. His body hung limp. He was rotting in a slack-jawed, empty-eyed scream. Even when he was

tied up there, spread out and facing the ground, I recognized him.

A bitter taste rose in my throat. My chest pounded harder and harder and harder... I couldn't stand it, but I didn't move. Not until a lone bee flew out of his gaping maw. Jerking back, I turned to the exit.

Mary stood there.

I recoiled.

“I knew you'd come eventually.” An indulgent grin spread across her face. “But my, you took a while.”

The bees hummed above me. I felt the walls on every side, trapping me.

“I thought you'd show up sooner, but what can I say- you're simple. Dull. Unresponsive. Or *rational*, if you prefer.”

I stared at her in horror. “You... why would you do this?” I choked. I took another step back.

“Why, why, why. Always why. It always needs a reason. Don’t you want to know *how* I got him up there?” her eyes seethed with feverish excitement.

“That’s sick!” I cried out.

Pushing past her, I bolted towards the house, legs pumping hard. I caught a glimpse of Percy as she disappeared from the guest room window. I hoped she was doing what I thought. As I sprinted closer to the front, I started yelling her name. My chest ached with pressure. The door was ajar when I got there, her terrified face poking through.

“Percy!” I called again, waving her out desperately.

Mary's footfalls thudded after me. With her daughter involved, her amusement had shifted to rage.

Percy stood on the porch when I arrived. I didn't waste a moment. Grabbing her arm, I pulled her down the steps, half-dragging her after me. She followed. Until she saw the hives. She stopped short.

I whirled around, not letting go. "Close your eyes!" I pleaded.

She shook her head.

Behind her, Mary was gaining on us, shouting and threatening for me to let go, her face a raddled purple. I couldn't let her get to Percy.

Just as I was about to pick her up, my cousin sprinted past me — right towards the hives. I followed, staying behind her. She wasn't fast enough. Mary was catching up.

Each plodding step drew nearer, each shout louder. When we reached the thick of the bees, she was seconds away. Adrenaline tearing through me, I slammed my hands against a hive. It toppled and cracked on the ground. Black swarms seethed from the crevice. I stumbled and rushed away, swatting at the sharp stings pricking my skin. I didn't look back. The screams and hollers behind me were enough to know that Mary was no longer in pursuit.

I caught up with Percy, and we ran. The belly-high grass whipped at our legs. The ground pounded on our feet. My heart was ready to burst.

We kept going, and going and going until the house was nothing but a dark crumb and the sound of bees had dwindled to nothing. I slowed to a halt, breath heavy.

Maybe I was faster, but I had nowhere near the endurance of my cousin, who had been pulling me along near the end. I looked at her. Her face was like stone, but her eyes glistened. I hoped she didn't know what was in the greenhouse.

And I hoped she never would.