



# Claire

Claire has a lot to be thankful for. She has a wonderful son from a first marriage and two more children from her second. However, life doesn't give her forever when it comes to good things. Watch how Claire handles the news that is brought to her door, watch how this very strong woman, continues with strength enough for her whole family to rely on. Watch longer how she finds happiness.



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The knock on the door has Claire getting up from playing cards with her two younger children. “Hold on guys.” She walks over to the door and opens it up to see two police officers standing before her looking very serious.

“Mrs. Mitchel?” they ask.

“Please, do come in.” Claire says. Her mind takes a quick family count. Two kids on the floor in the living room, her son Trent, from her first husband, is upstairs in his room. She recently heard him throwing books against the wall again. Must be a tough math test coming up. Her husband, oh. Claire stops and looks at the police officers, her husband is not here. He is due home soon, but instead there are two police officers in front of her. What does one do when one expects to hear about the death of a husband? Is she supposed to fall apart? Is she supposed to scream, or in this case, is she supposed to smile because her Bennet was right. Again. She chooses to smile. Damn, he is always right. Even in death he is right. Her admiration for her husband has taken yet another step higher. How she loves him, will always love him.

“Gentlemen, won’t you please sit, I can’t stand talking to people when I have to look up and you’re both so much taller than me. Baily honey, please go get your brother upstairs. Tell him the police are here and he needs to come down right away.” Claire says to her eight-year-old daughter. She looks down at her five-year-old boy Harry, the spitting image of his father. “Harry please bring the officers one of the water bottles from the kitchen, I’m sure they are thirsty.” Harry jumps up to do what is asked of him.

“Maám, it is probably better to talk quickly while the children are out of the room.” One of the officers says.

Claire looks to the stairway and then the door to the kitchen. “Oh, did you think I sent them out for that reason? No, you will wait for them to come back, we will hear this together. We do everything together in this house. Always have. My husband insisted, especially since my first husband treated our son Trent as if he never mattered, that his opinion never mattered. No, everyone counts here. For any and every thing no matter how big or small.” She says firmly.

“As you wish. Thank you son.” The officer says to the young boy handing him a water bottle and a cookie.

“You welcome, we baked today because we wanted to, no party.” He says proudly.

“Mmmm, very good. How old are you?” the officer asks, hoping the other two come soon.

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Trent has not always been good in school. Then one day his father up and left. Came home for dinner and after dinner he said to Trent and his mother that he was leaving, dropped some papers in front of his mother and said ‘take care of the kid I have no need for him’ and walked out.

He watched as his father left the house. He stood next to his mother and he remembers she looked at him straight in the eye and said, “You will always count to me. I need you each and every day and don’t ever think otherwise.” She had hugged him and then called her mother.

Trent’s grandmother was a lawyer, now she is retired but she knows everyone there is to know in the business. She came running over with a friend of hers and the friend sat down and looked through all the papers that were left in front of his mother. At some point his grandmother took him out for ice cream even though the hour was passed his bedtime.

He remembers they talked and laughed a lot. She told him that when her own father died, his great grandfather, his great grandmother thought she would have a really hard time because now she had to be both mother and father to her children. But she was wrong his grandmother told him. She never had to be a father, only a stronger mother and that she was sure that Trent’s mother was going to be equally as strong as her own mother was. She also promised to help him out any time he needed her, any time of day. Trent had only been eight years old at the time. The same age as his half-sister Baily is now.

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Trent’s mom met his step-dad at the community theater. She and his aunt always had a standing date with each other to go to opening night of the new season at the community theater regardless of what was showing, sometimes they came home laughing at how awful the show was and other times they didn’t stop talking about how wonderful the acting was. Once in a while Trent got to come too.

One of the times Trent got to go was when his aunt went into labor only a couple of hours before the show started. It was supposed to be a murder mystery but the acting wasn’t so good and the story was silly so Trent and his mom kept laughing throughout the performance. The man sitting next to them joined them. During intermission they struck up a conversation. He included Trent in the conversation the whole time. He didn’t ignore him as just being a kid, Trent remembers being impressed by that instantly.

Soon, his mom was talking to Bennet every day. He had dinner with them twice a week at their house. Bennet was the first to notice that Trent’s brain worked differently than others and that math was as hard for him as drawing would be for someone who was not artistic. Numbers did not make sense to him. Numbers are what Bennet does for a living. His mind only thinks in terms of math somehow.

One night he came over and heard Trent throwing books against the wall and he came up to his room to stop him. The first thing he did was sit down on the floor with Trent and simply talk to him. He asked about how he felt about his dad leaving. He asked about how he felt about him being around his mother. They talked for two hours before they finally came downstairs, Trent’s mom had made all of his favorites for dinner that night.

The three of them ate in peace and then Bennet told Trent he would come over any day he needed help with math. If he couldn’t come he would help him on the phone. Without even seeing the page, Bennet was always able and willing to help Trent at any given time of the afternoon with his homework, math or otherwise. When he did it after dinner, he helped then too. When he got into higher math, as the years went on, Bennet was there again.

Sometimes Trent’s grandmother would tease her daughter saying it looked as if Bennet was dating both Trent and his mom. Trent remembers his mom looking at his grandmother and saying, “What is wrong with that?” Trent had felt very important that his mom stuck up for him. He remembers that his mother always defended him and that Bennet and she always talked to him when things would affect him in any way.

Talked about how to handle his behavior when his choices were bad, how to handle his grades when they slipped, everything was talked out. Trent was included, sometimes they even helped him figure out why he was doing whatever it was he was doing and they always worked together to fix whatever the situation was or regardless of whomever was involved. Trent would hear stories from kids at school how bad a step parent could be but he never felt more loved, he counted himself lucky. Bennet wasn’t a step father, he was his only father.

Before they got married Bennet took Trent out and talked to him about what it would mean when their bedroom door would be closed and what it would mean if sometimes he took his mom out without him. No one was shutting him out but sometimes adults needed alone time as much as children did. Bennet confided in Trent that he grew up in a house of secrets and he promised himself that one day when he has his own family, there will never be secrets even if someone gets upset or angry.

True to his word, Bennet and Trent’s mom kept that promise. Sometimes he would come home and tell them he did something stupid in school. He got in trouble, he got a bad grade, even when he thought bad things that he wanted to do to other people; they discussed anything. Sure, they yelled occasionally, but things were also resolved, they worked hard all the time to not have any unfinished business. There were times it took a day or two, but the goal was always met.

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Today is no different than any of those days, Trent has a big math exam. He can't wait to finish this year in high school so he doesn't have to take any more math ever again. He plans on going to art school and Bennet and he have already discussed which schools he is best suited for.

But for today, he has to pass this exam and it is exhausting him to even look at the review pages. He makes the call, "Dad? I need help. I can't do this test, there is no way. I know I only have one semester left, but I can't, you don't understand how much I can't." he says quite agitated.

"Trent, have you ever noticed the more upset you are the more sincere you sound when you call me? I hear it in your voice. I feel you in my heart. Son, I've told you a hundred times. I'm here for you. We can do this." He says, Bennet's own voice sounding low as well. He is driving home from the doctor and the news is all bad.

He is not sure how he is going to tell his wife and children that he is losing the battle with the cancer he promised to beat. He promised her the cancer was not going to win. He has never broken a promise to her or Trent since he has met them. Trent started to call him Dad after the wedding, no one asked him to, his words came from inside and that has always made Bennet feel lucky, up until then he had called him Bennet. Trent has always shown him respect, as Bennet has shown him in return. His whole world is Claire, Trent, Baily and Harry. Claire's father died last year, his mother in law hasn't been doing well since. She is completely heartbroken and misses him terribly. Will she be up to helping Claire? He hopes so. Maybe it will help her get back on her feet, being needed. Maybe Morgan will step in, Claire's baby brother, he is a great guy, someone Bennet holds dear to his heart even though they aren't blood brothers.

"Dad, we have to know three chapters for this test. And to make matters worse, the teacher said if anyone receives higher than a 90 on the test, they get a pass on the big final. Do you realize how impossible that is for me? That means I have one more huge test like this." Trent's voice is in panic mode now.

"Yes, it does Trent but did you hear yourself? One more. That is all. One semester one more test and you are done with math. You can say you are finished, that you crossed the finish line. You'll be done. I'm so proud of you. Let me hear what you are fretting over." Bennet says softly. He really wanted to be here for that last semester. He hopes the teacher gives him a pass anyway.

Trent explains all that is on the test from all three chapters. "Ok, we've covered that last group recently. It is the same work we did in my office, go find those papers, I think they are still on my yellow pad and you can go over those, you knew those, remember?"

"Oh, that's right. Ok, I remember now. Those aren't too bad. But the rest?" Trent asks almost willing to exhale.

"Ok, go back to the first group and read me some problems, I have a long drive home so we can get to these one at a time." Bennet knows that Trent is anxious which is why he called him. He can usually explain each one on the phone upon hearing Trent read the problem. After hearing about the first one he says, "Sure, we can do these but give me a minute, I need to write some of this information down, I'm going to pull over."

Trent sits on his bed now trying to figure out how to go down and tell his mom what has happened. One minute his father is talking to him and the next he hears a loud crash that sounded god awful, as if a whole building crumbled down then a lot of screaming. Trent had to hang up. He couldn't hear anymore.

The knock on his door startles him, Baily lets herself in, "Trent, Momma says you have to come downstairs, because the police are here." She says innocently.

Trent looks up at his half-sister, only by blood, by heart she is fully his sister just as Bennet is fully his father. The police, oh no. Now he knows what happened, Bennet had said to him 'hold on I need to write that one down' what felt like only a couple of minutes later was the crash, then Trent heard his father



say, I love you all, it wasn’t the cancer, it was a blaze of glory.’ Trent caused his father to crash and now he is not here. It is all his fault and the police have come to get him.

Trent is shaking from inside. How is his mother going to handle the truth? How is he? He killed his father. “Trent? Even though I’m already eight, am I really too big for you to carry me on your back?” Baily asks through his fog.

Trent looks at his sister, the least he could do is to give her a happy farewell. He looks around his room, mentally saying goodbye to all he has. “Jump on.” He tells her and carries her down the stairs, he sees his mom sitting across from the policemen; they look at him with stern faces. Yep, he is being charged with murder. The weight is almost too much.

He runs to his mother, drops Baily and begins to cry and apologize to her at the same time. She can’t control him. Claire has no idea what he is saying. She thinks of Bennet being gone and now her son thinks he will be too? She is very confused. She pulls Trent in for a long hug, a tight hug and when she lets go she looks into his eyes, they are full of regret, she can see it, feel it.

“Please, sit down son. When we are done explaining then you can explain what you are feeling. But hear us out first. Ok?” One officer says, he had heard some of what the boy said and put the pieces together already.

“No, don’t make them suffer, take me now and Mom will explain to them later.” He says and stands with his hands out to be cuffed.

Now the officer looks this young man in the eye and with full sincerity says, “You’re not going anywhere until you hear what we came to say, then, if you need to tell us something you can. Is that ok Mrs. Mitchel?” he asks the boy’s mother.

“Sure, Trent, come sit near me and hold on to Harry.” Baily hops into her mother’s lap and Harry gladly jumps into Trent’s on the chairs opposite the officers.

“I’ll start at the beginning. We were called by a woman over on Dutches Avenue, about 20 minutes from here, that there was a man sitting outside her house in his car, she admitted that she is a paranoid type but asked if we could please come check him out anyway, that he had been there for at least 15-20 minutes already and didn’t look like he was going to leave any time soon, he had turned off his lights and had the light on inside his car.

We take these calls seriously so we went out. No sirens, we simply were going to drive by. We approached from behind and stopped in front of the house two houses down so the person inside would not get suspicious of us. We ran the plates and found out that the person who owns the car has never even had a parking ticket. Nothing on his name.

So, figuring walking was safe, we decided to go on foot to approach the car. When we got as far as only one house away a car from the other direction came barreling down, it seemed to slow down, so we did too, thinking maybe the woman was right, then, like a bullet the large car sped up and purposely ran their car right into the driver’s side of the car. I’ve never seen such a large car pick up speed like that. Really, the only way I can describe what we saw, is a bullet.

We called the accident in right away and we pulled our guns out and approached the large vehicle from behind towards the driver’s side. We knew the person he hit was not alive, he couldn’t be. His car was half the size and as we got closer we saw enough to give us a confirmed answer, I won’t say what we saw.

Then a woman from the house came running out, she started screaming at the driver of the vehicle. It took us a moment to assess what was going on. The ambulance arrived then and immediately began to check the person whose car was hit from the passenger’s side of the car. No other way to get in. They confirmed what we suspected immediately.

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The driver of the larger car needed some assistance getting out of the car; when he heard but the woman screaming, he began to laugh. A second police car had come too and we quickly looked at them and told them to charge the person from the larger car with vehicular homicide. Possibly pre-mediated by the looks of things. That we witnessed the whole thing and the whole incident is probably on our dash-cam video. Then the woman said she did too, witness it that is, and didn’t care if it was her husband, she will testify against him for pre-meditated murder.

So, I probably should not have given you all the details, and I’m not sure the young ones understood what we said, but there you have the whole story. Now, son, what do you want to add?” The officer says concerned for the young man.

Trent looks to his mom for strength. She holds his hand and squeezes tightly. She is not sure what is so heavy on his head. “I was doing math with Dad on the phone, I couldn’t wait for him to come home I was panicked over the test, he said he was going to be a while before he came home but I was so panicked over this test I couldn’t wait for him. I said that already, he told me he had to pull over and write this down. I’d been doing the hard chapter with him first and I guess he couldn’t do all the numbers in his head. So, he pulled over, we did the first few. I guess that is when the woman noticed him stopped. It’s all my fault. He pulled over because of me. I killed him, you can take me now.” He says again to the police officers with his head bowed down in shame.

Claire’s tears begin to fall, not because her husband is dead but because Trent thinks it is his fault. He didn’t hear anything they said. “Trent, did you hear what the officer said? A man in a large car, double the size of Dad’s decided to turn on his gas and ram into Bennet’s car on purpose. Who knows, maybe that man thought he was going to kill himself. Maybe he didn’t see there was a person in the car, or maybe he did and didn’t care. Did Bennet say anything to you before he hung up? Anything at all, think a moment.” she asks hopeful. “Think honey.” She whispers

Trent looks at his mom, what had he said? “It wasn’t the cancer, it was a blaze of glory. I love you all.” Trent says.

“Damn him.” Claire says.

She turns to the officers to explain, “My husband had cancer. He was on his way back from the doctor which is over in Wayner County, he wouldn’t let me go as long as he could drive on his own, and he could, perfectly capable and in complete control. He promised me when he was diagnosed that he wasn’t going to die of cancer; that he was going to die in a blaze of glory. He was right, the cancer didn’t get him. And Trent, he loves us all. This is not in any way your fault. His doctor called me after Bennet left and told me the truth. Bennet was losing the fight. Somehow the doctor knew Bennet wasn’t going to tell us the whole truth. Your dad chose to come home the scenic route instead of the main roads. Otherwise he would not have had the opportunity to pull over he would have had to find the next exit on the highway. Or, he would have gone on to the next question and tackled that one when he got home.

This is how he wanted the end somehow, this is how he predicted he would go. It was a series of changes that put him in that spot. But Trent you heard the crash, didn’t you? That may haunt you for a while, and that is ok, but no guilt, you have no guilt.” She says now holding his face in her hands.

The police officer is very impressed with this woman and with the young man in front of him. That was a harsh confession and one that came from deep inside. “Again, my apologies for being graphic, but since we were the ones there I thought it best we told you the whole story, not one that is conjecture or condensed for a police report. Thank you for your water and the cookies. We’re sorry for your loss, don’t get up. We’ll see ourselves out.”

The two officers walk outside. “What the hell was that?” one asked.

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“That is what it means to be family. I think it may take a while for that young man to let go of the guilt and the sounds he heard but it looks like he will have a strong support system. It is to be envied, really envied. Now I’m going home to my daughter and we’re going to have ice cream for dinner because I say so.” He grins.

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“I don’t understand what they said.” Baily says. “Trent are you ok?” she asks. Trent looks at Harry, “Can I have a cookie too?” he asks. Harry jumps off his brother and runs into the kitchen to gather more cookies.

“They said that Dad has died in a car accident. Do you know what that means?” Claire asks.

“Dead is when you don’t come back I think.” Baily says.

“Yeah, religious people say it is when God calls you back home to be with Him.” Claire says.

“Like Grandpa.” Baily says quietly.

“Yeah, now they can play cards all day together.” Claire says laughing at how Bennet and her father always played cards for peanuts or candies, whatever was in the house at the time.

“Why aren’t you crying Mom?” Trent asks.

“Because I’m too busy being annoyed that he was right. You know what else he is right about? He told me last week that you were really good at illustrating what others talk about and that you do people very well. You could work for the police as the person who draws what people describe or you could become a book illustrator because you understand what people write, where their head is, and that you would easily be able to see the author’s vision. Then he said ‘or maybe Claire he will become his own person and surprise us. But I know one thing, Trent is going to be a fine young man, he will make a wonderful husband and father one day.’

I could cry, and I probably will off and on. But right now, I want to breathe in the fact that he died doing what he loved doing. Math, with you, you may hate me for saying that but Trent, you and I know he hated the cancer with all his might. He never wanted cancer to win.” She tells him.

Trent sits down on the floor with Harry and his game. “I hate math more now. It may take me some time but I hear you and what you are saying. Yeah, like a sailor dying at sea. I get that Mom and yeah, the whole cancer thing pissed him off. A blaze of glory.” He says softly as he ruffles Harry’s hair and then begins to tickle him and grabs for Baily and does the same to her.

Clair watches as her three children roll around on the floor trying to tickle each other. She looks down again and sees a card on her lap, the officer must have left it for her. That was nice. She should call her mother and her sister and the rest of her siblings. “I’ll be right back, I’m going to order dinner instead of making any and have it delivered.

First she calls her mom and tells her what happened in complete detail, her mom’s immediate response is, “I’m coming, I’ll pick up dinner.” Claire knew that is what she’d say, which is why she called her first.

She calls her brothers, one of which offered to go down and identify the body, she gave him permission to do that, she didn’t want to see him so banged up. Besides he is a doctor, he has seen things like that before. One brother began to cry, he really loved Bennet; they were great friends from the moment they met.

When she calls her sister, her best friend, her sister screams on the phone, her husband quickly takes the phone from her and screams “What did you say to my wife and who the hell is this?”

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“Gene, it’s Claire, Bennet was killed in a car accident. The police just left, one of my brothers is going down to identify the body, the other is crying and mom is bringing over dinner. Do what you want, I had to tell you guys right away is all.” She says softly.

“Aw crap Claire, I’m sorry. We’ve had some prank calls lately I thought it was more of the same. We’re coming. I’ll call Mom to add on a few dinners.” He says.

“I’m sure she already has assumed as much, but go ahead and call her. I’ll call his lawyer and get the funeral details; we already worked everything out when he was diagnosed.” She says and hangs up before she loses her ability to speak.

A hand on her shoulder stops her from making the next call, “Mom, I’ll call the lawyer, you go be with Baily and Harry. Baily is still churning this all in her head. I’m assuming everyone is coming. With family around we will be ok. I’ll be good. Maybe not now, but I will. But that is to be expected I guess.” Trent says and kisses his mother’s cheek.

He walks into his father’s office, closes the door and makes the call to the lawyer who said he too will be right over. It is the only family member his father ever spoke to, a second cousin.

Then Trent makes a call he hopes is received well, the phone rings once, then twice, then again, before the next ring finishes an angry voice says, “Yeah, what now Bennet?” his own grandfather says. Trent knew Bennet had the numbers in his desk. He showed him where they were after being diagnosed, now that he thinks about it, he showed Trent a lot of things. Bennet must have known his chances of survival were not as good as he promised them to be. He trusted Trent and that trust and love is what will get him through this.

“It’s Trent, I’m calling to let you know Bennet, your son, died in a car crash today, we will e-mail you when we have details. Don’t come to the house and don’t call either. Like I said, we will e-mail you the information about the funeral. Look at it or don’t I won’t care one way or the other, but don’t show up at all if you’re bringing that attitude sir. I’ll personally kick your ass right out.” He slams the phone down hoping the man felt his anger. He had promised Bennet, when the time came, he would make that call. He did, but now his hand is shaking.

“Trent, how are you doing?” Trent looks up to see his Uncle Gene.

“I called the lawyer and Bennet’s father. I promised him I would if the cancer won.” He says.

“Ah Jack Mitchell, lover of all things Jack Mitchell. I hope you hung up on him after you gave him the information.” Gene says with sincerity.

“Actually, I did. No, actually I slammed the phone down hard.” Trent says rubbing his hand.

“Listen, Trent, I’m no Bennet when it comes to math but I’ll get you through to the end of this year ok? It will be good practice for me when my daughter hits high school next year.” He smiles, or at least tries to.

“So you heard.” He says.

“My mother in law gave me the graphic details your mom shared with her. I’m sworn to secrecy but she needed one of us to know she said. Your mom is right, it was an unfortunate series of changes in plans that all had to come together. I know you may carry some guilt for a while but work hard not to. And if you need to talk to someone or to scream, or even if you want to go to the gym and box it out, I’m your man.” Gene says with his arms out.

Trent jumps into his uncle’s arms and allows himself to cry again. Gene has a hard time holding his own in, Bennet was one of a kind. He will be missed by everyone. Trent looks up at his uncle, “Will you stay here, I have one more call to make and I’m not sure how well this will go.”

“Sure son.” Gene closes the door and sits next to him in the chairs Bennet had out for when he met with clients at home.

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“Hello Keri? Trent here. Listen. Um. I know we had a long talk the other day but I’m not sure I’m up to starting anything new right now. Um, you see.” He takes a deep breath. “My dad was killed in a car accident today and I’m going to need to get past this before I can give you the time you deserve. I hope you understand.” He pauses again, about to hang up when she speaks.

“Well, we haven’t worked that out yet, the lawyer is coming over with the Will and details soon. You know he was sick, remember I told you that, but I never heard what the arrangements were. I believe it will be right away, maybe even tomorrow. Thank you for understanding.” He hangs up quickly.

“Am I wrong?” he looks to his uncle.

“Takes a very big man to do what you did Trent, Bennet would have approved. I’m sure. Come, Grandma will be here soon with enough food for three army battalions. She went for fried chicken.” Gene smiles at Trent.

“This day sucks. If I don’t get above a 90 on the test I’m screwed and the test is in two days.” He says letting his mind wander to non-sad things.

“Really Trent?” Gene says. “You will be home mourning, no one is making you take that damn test unless they go through me. Understood?” he says firmly but with love.

“Promise?” Trent looks to his uncle; his uncle sees one very scared young man. First father walked out and now this one is taken away. Gene will have to step in, he owes Bennet that much at least.

“As sure as I’m standing here. Come on.” He pulls Trent over to him and they walk out together to see that the other uncles have shown up, one with his wife and new baby, one by himself is playing with Baily and Harry and keeps wiping tears from his own eyes. The baby of the family, Morgan. He was like this when his father died last year too. He pushes Trent to that uncle, Trent nods and walks over to sit down with them. He is immediately hugged by Uncle Morgan.

~ ~ ~

With all of the children put to sleep in various rooms, the adults now gather at the dining room table. The lawyer stands to speak, “I’ll be brief, on the way over I already called the funeral home, they have Bennet already and are doing what needs to be done. Bennet insisted on doing a graveside only service and it will be done tomorrow at 11:00am. He is being buried to the left of his father in law.” The lawyer looks at Claire’s mother, she gasps and puts her hand on her heart.

“His own request.” The lawyer says to her, Claire, her sister and her mother all have a single large tear rolling down their cheeks now. Trent is sitting next to his mother, he is the only child at the table.

“He said any brothers in law who wants to speak are free to do so, when I got here I sent the e-mail to his parents, if they come they will be escorted to a specific corner where they can see but *not* be heard. Also, his request. He knows his parents are good at making a spectacle but when they see where they are being seated, they will shut up immediately. You don’t need to know why, but they will, family stupidity but Bennet is right on this one, so please don’t change it and DON’T feel bad for them. They made their own bed on this one.” He looks around and everyone nods.

“Claire, he asks that you please where blue somewhere. I’m assuming you know what that means. Trent he specifically said you are not obligated to speak, do what your heart wants and if you don’t speak, he will hear you anyway. Morgan, otherwise known as, the baby, is asked that he sings whatever he wants, the service won’t be long and if you want to sing you can, before during or after he said. Then to his mother in law he asks that you please keep people from bringing in too much food. He says the kids don’t like leftovers so much and Claire doesn’t eat when stressed. From my perspective, everything is set in motion, any questions?” he asks.

Trent raises his hand, “Yes Trent.”

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“How do we notify his friends? He had so many? I don’t want to miss anyone, it won’t be nice.” He says.

“Your mom took care of that already I believe. There was a friend e-mail group set up years ago for emergencies only. I believe there is around 50 people signed on at this point. They announce parties, big events happy or sad. It is the fastest way, and they all agreed to use this group for emergencies only. Whoever is not on this list, I’m sure has already been called by now. It will be standing room only. His client list has been notified as well.

Then there is always word of mouth. Now, I wish you all a good night’s sleep, I hope some of you get some. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. My daughter will be here to babysit the young ones, and there will be two cars here to take you all to the cemetery.” He looks around for any more questions.

Gene stands to walk him to the door. “I’d hate to have your job right now.” Gene says.

“He is all I have as far as family goes.” He says.

“No, no he isn’t.” Gene says and hugs him goodbye.

~ ~ ~

As predicted, there looks to be a whole neighborhood of people standing around the grave about to be filled. Trent, his uncles and the lawyer are all pallbearers. When the first shovel of dirt hits the coffin Claire finally lets go of the wail she didn’t know was inside of her. Her mom is right there and so is Trent. Baily was given a choice and she decided to stay home. Gene helped his wife, holding her up while Morgan was singing. He sang Bennet’s favorite love song, seemed to be the most fitting since when you looked around all you see is love in everyone’s eyes.

Trent is walking around as people speak, he can’t stand still, too much inner energy to burn that he doesn’t know what to do with. He walks around the perimeter of the crowd, then he sees them, Bennet’s parents, they were given chairs that had a view of the grave but from back there, you can’t hear much nor could anyone hear them should they choose to speak or even cry out. He doesn’t know what happened but they look as if they know why they are there, so he leaves it alone as the lawyer said. At least they came, he thinks to himself.

With his head down, he bumps into someone, he is about to say he is sorry when he sees he has bumped into Keri. “Keri?” he looks at her as if she is both an angel and a ghost.

“No one should do this alone. I’ve been there, let me help. As your friend.” She says.

“Been where?” he asks.

“My brother, brain cancer, he was only 21. The whole year he had cancer, he was drinking wine because he kept telling me, now he is old enough and it doesn’t matter anyway. Please Trent?” she asks again.

“I didn’t know. When was this? Did we know each other yet? Was I a jerk to you?” he asks hoping for a no.

“No, you weren’t a jerk. In fact, you were the only one who called because I wasn’t in school for a couple of days. You asked if I was sick and I told you no, I lied to you. I told you that there was a family emergency I needed to deal with. I didn’t want your sympathy, I didn’t want anyone’s but I did want your friendship and you gave me that.” She says.

“You’re an idiot, you know that, right?” he says.

“Yeah, I do now, and I want to give you what I think you would have given me. Companionship during a crappy time. Again, I ask you though, please?” Keri says.

“I’ve been known to throw things when I get angry. Books usually. Mostly math.” He tries to grin.

“Better than me, I would throw my homework on the barbeque and watch it burn on purpose.

Then when I didn’t turn something in teachers were too embarrassed to give me a hard time so they would

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give me another copy and more time. That’s how I lost our lab report too.” She bows her head because at the time Trent was her lab partner.

Without knowing what else to do, Trent pulls her in for a hug and to his surprise she feels good in his arms. “Come, my mom will be looking for me. I think Uncle Morgan is singing again at the end.” They walk together back to the front of the funeral.

Uncle Gene sees Trent walking in with a girl and he knows exactly who she must be. Good for you, he thinks to himself. Trent did right but this girl did better. She came anyway. Good for you darling, I can’t wait to meet you. He says to himself.

~ ~ ~

Trent goes through a myriad of emotions during the mourning period following the funeral. Baily has been unable to express herself most of the time, so she sits next to her mom or Trent and sometimes her grandmother when the house is full of people.

Uncle Morgan turned out to be quite helpful during this time. Uncle Gene took the down time to help Trent study for the inevitable test he has coming up. It took their minds off of what was going on in the house.

Now it is the night before the test and Trent is having a hard time even looking at the math. He can’t think of math without hearing the crash in his ears. He doesn’t hear the knock on the door, nor does he see anyone walking into his room, he is too busy crouched down on the floor with his hands over his ears trying to drown out the sounds of the crash so he can focus.

Someone touches his hands and he looks up. Keri, she smiles at him and holds his hands in hers. With her eyes she tells him not to speak so he doesn’t. She picks up the math pages in front of him and he sits and watches her. Keri had decided to do this days ago but it still has taken all her courage to actually be here. She puts the papers in order and shows them to Trent. The first page has equations on them, she uses her finger as if she is reading music and she begins to sing a beautiful melody only there are no words coming out of her mouth, there are numbers. She sings the first set of numbers, then the operation and the second number. She sings how to perform this operation and with each step her melody is sounding sweeter.

After the first page which had nine problems listed, she looks at Trent. “Do you understand these yet? Or should I repeat this?” she asks simply.

Trent is not sure what to do so he answers her honestly. “Number five doesn’t make sense, I think I have something wrong.”

She looks at his work, takes out a pencil and does it on her own page, yes, she sees the difference. She changes his page and sings this one equation over for him. He had no idea she could sing so well. No idea at all. They sit together and she gets him through the toughest part of the test. When they are done studying he looks to her and asks her a simple question.

“When was the last time you sang for anyone?” even though he feels he knows the answer.

“I used to sing for my brother. No one else.” she says bowing her head.

“Why not?” he asks.

“I don’t think I’m that good. I would cheer him up when the treatments were bad. He fought his battle for two years. 19, 20, 21, I was only 12,13,14 at the time. Remember it was 9<sup>th</sup> grade lab?” she says.

“Yeah.” He sits down on the floor next to his bed, “Keri, why are you here?” he asks still trying to give her every opportunity to walk away from him.

“Because my friend recently went through a traumatic experience and a loud, horrible sound was part of it, so I thought maybe if my sound used to help my brother it might help my friend too. Is that so

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terrible? Maybe slightly conceited to think I could help change your memory.” Trent I don’t ever want to let you go, so I came running over to share with you what I’ve only given my brother, can’t you see that? She screams in her head.

Trent thinks about what has happened here. Keri has been the breath of fresh air he needed each day, yet he keeps pushing her away, why? He doesn’t want to leave her, he knows he doesn’t, he hurts when she is not around. He doesn’t want her to leave either, that would be too much but they are too young to think of forever so he has to push her away, right? He shakes his head.

“Can I make a request?” he asks.

Thinking he wants her to sing a particular song, Keri hesitate, “I’ll do my best.” She says.

“Can you save your voice for me? At least for now. Don’t try out for choir, they will ruin you by making you sing old songs and holiday favorites, whatever that means.” He says trying to smile.

I’ll save all of me for you, she thinks to herself. “I think that is a request I can do easily. Should we go over this one more time?” she asks now eager to sing for him as she used to be for her brother.

“No, let’s go help Mom make dinner first, then we will review again.” He says as he stands and holds out his hand to take hers. Keri gladly gives it to him.

~ ~ ~

Claire and her brother Morgan have been cleaning up the house the past couple of days. All those people coming in and out, no one paid attention to where food was dropped or dirt was dragged in.

“Morgan, you’ve really been a great help to me and the kids. You watched me cry, you cried with me, you cried with the kids too. You have real siblings, why so many tears?” Claire isn’t trying to sound mean, she is actually curious.

“I loved Bennet. He talked to me like me and not like anyone’s baby brother. Like he treated Trent right off the bat. Everyone was equal to him, he made me feel like a person in this family.” He says openly.

“Guilty as charged. Morgan, you are officially no longer my baby brother, but the brother who can sing like a nightingale. Only lower. Oh and let’s not forget, you’re not afraid to clean a toilet.” She smiles at him.

Morgan begins to sing as Trent and Keri walk in. “How can we help?” he asks.

Claire turns to see who the ‘we’ is, when she sees Keri her heart melts. This girl has been as good as gold since Bennet died. She loves her already, and she heard her singing upstairs to help Trent lose the sound of the crash related to math. Morgan told her about hearing it and she ran up to hear this for herself, who knew math could sound so sweet and innocent?

What a beautiful gift she has. “Baily wanted homemade pizza, you game?” she asks.

“My dough is better than yours. I’ll do the dough, you cut the vegies.” Trent says to his mother. Claire grins, he is right, her dough doesn’t always work, she is not sure what he does differently and right now, she doesn’t care, she sees life back in her son.

“Ok, Keri do you know how to shred the cheeses?” Claire asks.

“Yes maám.” She says smiling. Her own mother can make hamburger and fries but that is about it. When Keri turned nine years old, she taught herself to cook. She loves being in the kitchen.

Morgan looks around and laughs, “Ok fine,” he moans, “I’ll get the kids to take their showers and finish homework, and you’re not even an evil step-sister.” He jokes with Claire.

~ ~ ~



Generally speaking, when there is a knock on the door, no one really cares. But in Claire’s house, the people that really know them, no longer knock. They ring the bell out of courtesy. But today there is a knock, Morgan, who has been staying with Claire since the funeral, answers.

He sees one officer standing there, “Can I help you?” he says in a shaky voice.

“I’m sorry to upset you, I am not here on any official business, my shift ended an hour ago and I wanted to stop by and see how the family is doing, I haven’t had a chance to change out of my uniform. The circumstances of the accident were very traumatic for me, and I was there, I can only imagine how it was to hear about such a thing. May I come in? Is Mrs. Mitchel even home?” the officer asks all in one breath.

Morgan shakes his head a moment. “Yeah, my sister is here. Go sit down, I’ll get her.” he walks into the kitchen to see Claire making dinner.

“Hey, um the officer who was there is here to check on you. You want to talk to him or should I shoo him away? Keeping in mind he is damn handsome.” Morgan says.

Claire turns to her brother. “You think everyone is handsome, man or woman, if they are in uniform. I don’t mind seeing him. It has been a month already. I think the shock is over, the sadness isn’t but that will come and go forever I suppose. Morgan, I don’t know if I’ve mentioned this enough but having you here has been surprisingly comforting. No offense.” She kisses his cheek and begins to walk to the living room.

Morgan grabs her wrist, “For me too. Why have we never done this before?” he puts his arm around her shoulders and they walk into the living room where they see Harry sitting on the officer’s lap.

The officer sees them and says, “He apologized to me for not having fresh cookies this time. How is he doing?” he asks.

Morgan laughs, “Hey Harry, we have cookie dough in the freezer, let’s go put some in the oven.” Harry jumps off the officer’s lap and runs to make the cookies.

“Harry is great. He is his father from head to toe to heart. Life will always be good for him even in the dark times. Which he tells me he is no longer afraid of because now Grandpa *and* Daddy are both up in heaven watching him to be safe. But in case something changes, I keep the hall light on anyway. Thank you for coming by. How have you and your partner been?” she asks. She can’t imagine witnessing such an accident and not being affected.

“I knew you were a strong family when I came here but for you to be asking about my wellbeing certainly confirms that. Truth is they are only sending me out for lighter things, although we thought that call was lighter too. The precinct psychologist suggested this for a couple of months. He also is the one who told me I should never have given you the whole story. That I should have left out details because of the kids being present. I’m sorry for that if I made things worse. How is your older son handling things? The guilt and all.” He asks.

Wow, he does remember everything, poor man, he must see so much and have to filter things out of his memory all the time but he kept her situation in his mind. That is special. Claire thinks to herself. “He is doing well. He has Keri in his life now and she has given him the strength to go back to school and to want to accomplish. I’m not sure he sleeps soundly yet but I think he is in a good place. My brother in law calls him almost daily to talk about ‘guy stuff’ and my brother Morgan has moved in with us. His lease is up next month anyway. We both work but he instantly took over all of Bennet’s chores. You know, killing spiders, getting rid of the scary monsters under beds oh, and most of all, he loves to do Baily’s hair and she lets him. She only let her father touch her hair too. Never me.” Claire smiles at the officer.

“Sounds like my little one. She said her mom didn’t know how to make her as pretty as I do.” He says looking at his hands



Claire heard the word didn’t, is the mother not around anymore? “That’s sweet. Tell me, why did you pick us to come visit? I’m sure you have many.”

The officer looks up at Claire, he knows he should be honest, she deserves that. But it is not easy to do, he hasn’t really said anything to very many people. She is looking at him with sincere concern. Before he can answer Morgan and Harry come marching back in, “Cookies!” Harry says and hands one to his mother first and the second one to the officer. Good kid, the officer thinks to himself.

Morgan sits down, “Ok, what did I miss?” he smiles at his sister.

“The officer was about to tell us why he picked us to come visit.” She looks to the officer again with concern in her eyes.

He takes a deep breath. “My wife died from a drunk driving accident. The person who came to tell me, left out a lot of details, I found them out on my own later. Some of them would have been important for me to know when the event first happened, not long afterwards when they no longer counted. Who was he to decide what to say and what not? So, from then on, I give over all the information I know and let the families decide if it was too much or not. Most appreciate it, well, they don’t kick me out so I’m assuming it is appreciated. The person who killed her was a new adult, 22, learned that he could drink and drive and not affect anyone. Until that day. He had claimed in court that it was the only day he had three drinks instead of two. So now he knows his limit and is sorry, then he asked if he could go now. The judge didn’t think that was much of an excuse and gave him a ten minute lecture about what it means to be responsible as an adult. Then he pointed to my daughter and asked the young man to look at her and say it again, that his decision to have that one more drink was not a big deal, except that it cost this young girl her mother’s life.

I went to the funeral you had by the way. It was beautiful. Your husband was obviously a wonderful man. Very loved by the whole community it seems. But sometimes even though he was loved, people don’t know what to say any more when they see you in public. I wanted to reach out and be the been there done that friend. But I see you have a brother who is helping out, that’s nice.” Why had he spilled so much of himself to this woman? To her brother? Does he still need to know he is not the only one?

“Maybe our girls should meet, how old is your daughter?” she asks.

He looks up at her, she doesn’t know? Doesn’t realize. How can that be? “Um, you don’t know?” he asks.

“I’m sorry, should I?” she looks to Morgan who shrugs.

“My daughter is Julie, I believe that is why Baily was not afraid of me when I first came in the day everything happened.” he looks at her again for confirmation she knows Julie.

Claire looks at Morgan and together they gasp and put their hands on their mouths, they had no idea. Neither had met Julie’s parents. “I’m terribly sorry. I’ve never met you, nor your wife. My babysitter and yours always get the girls together during the day before I get home and I hear about their playdates all night long. Oh, I’m a fool. I’m so sorry officer.” She reaches out to Morgan who grabs her hand tightly.

“I’ve only met Julie once or twice when I picked them up from a party and dropped her off at your home. I never ....” Claire pauses. How could she not have known this about her own child’s best friend? She will need to adjust her work schedule to be home more. This is not good.

“How old was she?” Claire asks.

“Julie was six years old, my wife was 35, we married late. She was pregnant when she died. The baby didn’t make it either. My mom helped out a while and a couple of organizations helped but things dwindled quickly, people assume a man doesn’t need much support. But Baily and Julie always keep life happy for each other. Julie called her every day during your mourning. Didn’t you know?” he asks.

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“I didn’t know what day it was nor who I spoke with, let alone anyone else in the house. After everyone left for the day Morgan would tell me who showed up. When it was quiet and I could focus, we wrote down names so we knew who to thank that came. Morgan is a stickler for showing gratitude. He and Baily baked the night before she went back to school so she could say thank you for all the cards she got. I am sorry, I really didn’t know. I feel awful. How could I not have known?” she asks him.

“I’m not sure I made the connection either upon seeing your husband’s name come up. It was when I saw Baily here at the house that I knew. I didn’t come during your mourning time because Julie said it was better for her to talk to Baily on the phone. I had to respect that, you know? I think she remembers our mourning house and didn’t want to relive the experience, even though she was young, some things you remember I guess.” he is looking at the brother now.

“Yeah, we get that, but where do we go from here?” Morgan asks.

“Friends? Maybe get together and let the girls talk, call me when you need a shoulder, other than your brother, no offense.” He says to Morgan.

“Non-taken. Claire?” he looks to his sister, still holding her hand

“That is probably a good idea.” Her attention is drawn to the front door, she sees Trent and Keri walk in together, at least today they are smiling.

“Hey Mom, Uncle Morgan, Officer?” he looks around the room. Harry runs to him.

“I baked cookies again. Hi Keri.” Trent picks up his brother. “Hey you. Did you finish the train yet or did you save me some to do? Keri can you bring in the groceries please.” He looks to her and she takes the bags into the kitchen, she looks to Claire and says, “Apparently it was decided today was my turn to make dinner, can I get started or did you already make something?”

Claire looks at Keri, “I only put up some soup. You can do the rest. My mom is coming too and so is my sister and her family. If you don’t have enough, look in the freezer.” Claire smiles and Keri nods.

Trent walks over to the officer and puts out his hand, “I believe I owe you an apology sir. My behavior last time I saw you was less than stellar. I’m doing much better now. Uncle Gene and Morgan here have stepped in to handle things so I can still be a kid. My apologies again.” He says still holding out his hand.

“No need for those, I’m sorry to be the bearer of the news is all. My daughter Julie really thinks you’re cute, I hope she won’t be jealous of Keri.” He smiles.

Trent looks to his mom then to Morgan, they both shrug which means they didn’t know either. “Julie is awesome. She met Keri already when we took the girls bowling last week. Keri then took the girls to get their nails done while I sat in the car and studied. Wow, Mom did you know?” he asks again.

“No, none of it. Trent, Julie lost her mother at the age of six to a drunk driver.” She looks to him for recognition.

“Mom, I knew that, didn’t you? But maybe you didn’t, your father was sick already then and your mind was pre-occupied but I didn’t know this man was her father. I’ve only known the babysitter same as you most likely.” Trent feels Harry begin to squirm in his hands. “Come let’s go finish putting together the train set. Officer, you want to see the train set Harry and I are putting together? Maybe you can help us put the signs up where they really belong. Teach Harry why they really go in certain places.” He ruffles his brother’s hair again.

The officer stands, “My name is Kent by the way, can we drop the officer?” he looks around the room.

Everyone nods. “I’d love to see your trains, but I’m supposed to get Julie from dance soon.”

“I’ll go. I’ll get both of them, you can stay for dinner; we tend to make enough for an army anyway.” Morgan says.

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“Are you sure?” hearing Morgan but only looking at Claire now.

“My pleasure, besides, I’m not a train guy, Gene is and he won’t be here until dinner time.”

Morgan smiles and heads out.

Kent makes his way downstairs with Trent and Harry.

Claire looks up at the ceiling, ‘thank you Bennet’ you knew, didn’t you? Damn I hate when you’re right.

~ ~ ~

“Claire, there is a man to see you in the waiting room. He looks very handsome but also very serious, I have no idea who he is, he only said to tell you his business with you is important.” A co-worker says.

“Ok, thanks I’ll go see who he is.” Claire stands to go.

“Really, on my word you’d go out to the waiting area? It could be some weirdo you know.” She says.

“No one gets passed our security guard downstairs, especially if they ask for a woman in this building. He must have already screened him. I’m good. Thank you.” Claire grabs her pocketbook as she leaves her office, maybe she will go to lunch while she is up. It has been a long couple of months and the one thing she has been avoiding is going out in public alone. She doesn’t know why, Morgan has also been very much a home-body. She loves her brother and is thankful for the time they have spent together. He fixed up her basement into his own place plus he left the large den for the kids to play in. They play trains all the time and there is a million pieces of various building toys as well. Creativity is never far away either. Trent and Morgan built a craft center in the den, one with a large table and lots of shelves for all kinds of crafting and art tools. The more expensive ones Trent keeps in his room.

Claire steps out into the waiting room and sees Kent. He is not in uniform. That is a nice change. She walks over to him and without thinking she kisses his cheek. “How are you Kent? Nice to see you out of uniform.” Then she blushes, that was not a nice thing to say.

Kent can feel the warmth of her kiss still on his cheek. He never thought he would even look at another woman let alone be attracted to one. But here she is. Claire, the strongest woman he has ever met. Her family is amazing, Julie and Baily love each other and Trent looks after Julie as if she was his own sister now. He is a good kid. They have triumphed over the trauma of their lives because they have done it all together. He didn’t mean for this to happen, he never expected to meet someone like Claire. But he is not here on personal business.

“Well, that was a nice greeting, I guess your project is going well. You were pretty stressed out the other day when I came by the house.” He says.

“Ah yes, well. We almost lost the client that day. I had to produce something quickly and I’m not good under pressure. Bennet used to keep me calm and my calm was nowhere to be found, but then Morgan began to sing and Keri joined in as they were in the kitchen making dinner together. I opened the door in the den and heard them. That made a big difference. Harry came in and gave me a big hug saying I looked like I needed one. That is the same thing Bennet would have done. Some days I miss him terribly but then I see that we created full lives for ourselves as well as our family. While there is a hole, I don’t feel like I have to fill it. In fact, the hole doesn’t bother me. Does that make any sense?” she asks looking him in the eye.

“For me it makes all the sense in the world. No one else would understand. We all have scars and holes in our lives, we can either see them as deterrents to move on. Better yet, we can look at them for what they are, a part of us. Stacy was my life, but after about six or so months without their daughter, her parents

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told me it was too hard to see Julie. Which is a shame, but they made the choice, I’m sure they will regret that decision later on but I told them we are always open to see them should they change their minds. But that is not why I’m here today. You know there is a court hearing on the man who killed Bennet tomorrow right? I was wondering if you wanted to go and if you do, if you’d like me to be there with you. I can go in uniform or not.” He says looking at her.

Claire sits down, she is not sure why she never thought about the man in the other car, it was never important to her she supposes. “You know Kent, all this time, I never gave the man a second thought.”

“No one contacted you? Not even your own lawyer?” he asks

“Our lawyer is Bennet’s cousin, his only family member he talked to since the age of 18. I’m not sure I even knew he was doing anything. Really. Maybe I should call him. I was thinking of grabbing lunch, want to join me?” she asks.

“If you’re calling the lawyer, maybe call Trent too and ask him to leave school to come join us. I’m sure he wants to know all of this as well. Sorry, I’m overstepping.” He says as they step into the elevator.

Claire sends Trent a text. Since Bennet died, the school has been very lax about his phone usage. He only uses it to contact family, and they only contact him in an emergency. School ends in two weeks but this is urgent. She tells Trent where they will be and why if he wants to join. When they get out of the elevator she calls the lawyer. He confirms all that Kent told her.

“I didn’t want you to worry. There is nothing for you to do. The witnesses all say he did what he did on purpose and he even admitted to that fact but his lawyer insists on a trial. He thinks that the man had sound reasoning for what he did. No one is saying what this reasoning is, I’m assuming it will come out in the trial. If he decided to claim insanity of some sort he will still be put away but in a psychiatric ward not with the general public of the prison. Even if a person snaps, so to speak, he still killed a man for no reason.

Sorry, I was rambling again. I’m sorry I didn’t inform you of any of this. I spoke to Gene a couple of times, he thought maybe you didn’t need to be involved unless you had to. Do you blame us?” he asks.

Claire looks at her phone, a text has come in, she sees that Trent and Keri are meeting them. She smiles, “Trent is coming to meet us for lunch. Come, tell us the details and we will decide as a family, its what to do. This is how we’ve always done things. Big or small. I’ll call Gene see if he is in between patients and he can join. See you soon, you know the place.” She hangs up.

Kent has been walking next to Claire this whole time, watching her and listening to her conversation with the lawyer. He has no idea where he is going. He is following, although the lawyer knows where to go. What an amazing family, always connected.

“Hello Gene, thank you for trying to keep me emotionally safe but showing up to the trial or not should have been my decision. We are meeting for lunch, want to join?” she asks.

“Aw, I’m sorry Claire, I was doing the same thing Bennet did when he had that trial early on in your marriage. Remember? It was the only thing you two didn’t decide together.” Gene says.

“And do you remember that it is the only thing he ever said he regretted, that he would have wanted me by his side for support. I know he had you there and Morgan, and I appreciated it then and now but Gene, he never got over that. I assumed you knew that part too. But it doesn’t matter now. Lunch?” she asks again.

“I’d love to. I’ll call your sister to see if she can get away too.” He hangs up. I should have known he regretted that. Claire is amazing, I knew that too. “Hello Honey.” He says to his wife very solemnly, knowing he will be apologizing to Claire for months to come.

A few minutes later everyone meets at an outdoor café only three blocks from Claire’s office. Everyone working there knows them. The owner comes out from the back to hug them all, Claire twice. “I’m good Marco, no worries. Look at my support system.” She points to everyone around her.

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“Trent, you are so much a man I almost didn’t recognize you. Who is your lovely lady next to you?” Marco asks.

“This is Keri, and yes, she is a lovely lady. My lady as a matter of fact.” Trent answers standing a little taller. Claire smiles at the two of them. To her, this looks like a forever couple, from here to eternity.

“You remember my brother Morgan, and this is Kent a good friend of the family.” Claire says.

“New friends are always welcome. Come, I have your room. Usual lunch? Any allergies to the newcomers?” Marco asks.

“I’m good.” Kent says.

“Me too.” Keri answers, she holds on to Trent’s hand. Ever since she sang for him, they have been inseparable. She has been instantly welcomed into his family, as if she was always supposed to be there. She had met Trent’s father a long time ago, at a science fair at school. She only remembers good things about him.

With everyone seated, the lawyer begins to speak, he explains what will happen tomorrow in the courtroom and what all the charges are. “He is looking at a long time behind bars I’m afraid. Maybe I should go, I probably made you all lose your appetite.” He stands and so does Kent.

Kent meets him before he gets to the door. “Sit, as I understand things here in this family, if you were invited it is because they all want you here. Not one or two but all. We will eat while everyone lets this information sink in, then they will discuss the new information.” He looks to Claire for confirmation and she smiles her quirky smile. The one he has grown to appreciate when he receives.

The lawyer walks back to sit down between Gene and Morgan. Lunch is met with easy conversation. Keri speaks up towards the end, “Now that we are all together, where to begin? Well, as you all know summer is only a couple of weeks away.

Trent and I were thinking of running a camp at the local recreation center for children of broken families, regardless of circumstances. From ages 8-12. When we brought the idea up to the head of the center, the people there were thrilled. We only found out last night that this was actually going to happen. I’m sorry if we didn’t talk to you all first but we thought we needed to see if things would even work. We had no idea the center would be so involved, we thought we were going to have to ask you all for help. But as things turned out, the lady in charge there, Mrs. Appleton, she said her kids could have used something like this when they were younger so she is all about helping this come to fruition. The bottom line is, we both have jobs for the summer. Please don’t be disappointed we didn’t ask first.” She looks mostly to Claire and Kent.

“Well, I see Bennet really rubbed off on you. My cousin would have been standing tall and screaming from the rooftops that his son is part of this. I, for one, am extremely proud. Have this Mrs. Appleton contact me so I can go over the legalities with her. On me. Does she have psychologists on staff too?” the lawyer asks.

“Yes, three of them, they will be head counselors and the kids won’t know their profession. We had to screen each counselor under them very well. Because we aren’t dealing with kids who will always be happy and the counselors had to know there will be good times and bad with no warnings. Once a week they have a late day where there will be activities for families to come. That was Mrs. Appleton’s idea. Each family that has signed up so far is committed to this. Within the first three days after opening enrollment, they filled up. They opened enrollment to see if there was interest, that’s why they called last night. It is kind of sad to know that there are 45 kids who needed this. 45, and in only our area. No one is driving very far.” Trent says the last part quietly.

“And one day he will surprise us and do great things – Bennet was right again.” She looks to Trent and the two of them share a secret smile.

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Trent squeezes Keri’s hand under the table.

~ ~ ~

The decision was that whomever felt that they wanted to be at the trial was welcome to come. In the morning Keri showed up in time to get the younger two off to school. She made Baily her favorite lunch and Harry was able to take two cookies with him today.

Gene and his wife showed up right after their kids were on the bus. Kent said he would meet them there, in the end he was called in as a professional witness and he had to go in uniform. They all drove in two cars and met the lawyer there.

The courtroom is full. Claire’s lawyer doesn’t know why. But then he looks around and realizes all these people knew Bennet and found out about the trial, it is public information. The family files in but only Claire and Kent sit with the lawyer.

What should have been an open and shut case turned into a circus. The man who hit Bennet has his own group of supporters behind him. That is, until they hear what comes out of his wife’s mouth. The shock is seen all around the room.

The man’s wife is on the stand, her husband’s lawyer calls her up not knowing she is against her own husband. Even though she made no secret she would testify against him to anyone who asked. His lawyer asks her to describe what she saw that day. She does, in great detail and when the lawyer sees what direction she is going he tries to re-direct her and she turns to the judge and says, “Didn’t he ask me to describe what I saw? I’m not done yet.” The judge let her finish, even up to the point that she admitted that she yelled at her own husband while he was being pulled out of his car. She told the courtroom that she said, “You see, you jealous idiot!!! You killed a man because you *thought* I was unfaithful while you were away. You came home early to catch me? Who does that?!!! The only way you would think that is if while you are away, you find extra curriculars to do that aren’t your wife. Take him away and charge him with what he needs to be charged with.”

The whole place stops for a moment. “I’m finished now. By the way judge, for the record I’ve always been faithful. I swore on a bible this morning and I’d do it again, lie detector, whatever you want. I’ve never cheated. Did I have a drink with a friend once or twice, yes. Were they men, yes, but I’ve known these guys since before college. But who doesn’t go out when their spouse is out of town?” she asks. “Am I free to go?”

“Any further questions?” the judge asks Claire’s lawyer.

“No your honor.” He has nothing to add to that.

She turns to the judge before she is fully back to her seat, “Do you want to know why he feels this way? I don’t mind saying.” The wife is speaking to the judge even though she is already down from the chair, she had turned to tell him the truth, this whole thing has made her sick. That a man had to die before her husband believed her, although she is still not sure he does. “During our engagement I was in a legal battle with an old lover. The suit was because I beat him out of a project and his firm blamed him, so he in turn found a way to blame me. On the stand he yelled out how at one time we were lovers and that I was only doing this out of revenge. It was a dumb suit, the judge had thrown out the suit as well as my ex. Even though I admitted to being this man’s lover at one time, it was long before we were even engaged, as in years before not weeks. I hadn’t even met my husband yet. So, there you have it, in public, one more humiliation you’ve brought me dear husband. Oh, your honor. Here is my phone, feel free to look through the old texts and view all the messages he has sent about how he knows I’m sleeping around. All the paranoid voice mails. They are all on there. If it wasn’t my husband you’d think it was harassment.” The man’s wife finally steps away fully now and as she passes her husband’s chair she spits on the floor.

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Claire has been staring at this woman the whole time. She never realized there was another person who must be hurting because of this. She watched as her husband did this to Bennet? Watched from a window to see how his jealous nature became violent. Claire only hopes that her children, if they have any, didn’t see this too. It is bad enough that her Trent heard that awful noise.

The closing arguments are something of a joke as well; the man’s lawyer tried to paint him as a man under tremendous stress and worry about his home life. Though he had no physical evidence to prove his point, his client’s inner feelings are his perception of his world. That in his mind, the only way to make things stop was to show her he knew about her indiscretions, and that he in no way knew there was a person in the car, his intentions were to only hurt the man’s car who was wrecking his life.

Claire had been watching all of his so-called support during the wife’s testimony as well as during the closing arguments. One by one, they had tried to leave the courtroom, only they aren’t allowed to once in session, so, instead they moved to the back and were all standing there waiting by the wall for the doors to open. They wanted to leave as fast as possible and not be identified with him in any way.

Claire’s lawyer didn’t do much. He had Kent and the other officer come up and explain what they saw again. Kent was the one who explained why Bennet had pulled over so Trent never needed to be called upon. The dash-cam video from the police car showed the whole thing. That was the hardest part for Trent and Claire to watch. Now they saw the end, a blaze of glory is all Claire kept telling herself. Not one of the witnesses stretched even one part of the truth.

The judge pronounced him guilty on all counts. Claire’s first instinct was to walk over to the wife. She taps her on the shoulder, the woman turns around. Claire looks at her and says, “I’m so sorry. We had nothing but trust in our lives.”

The woman looks at Claire in shock, why would she come over to her? What strength and empathy she must have. “I believe it is I who should be apologizing.” The woman says.

Claire looks into the woman’s eyes, she can tell, this woman told the truth, she never swayed. “I hope this helps you.” Claire says, “You see my husband had cancer, he was not winning the battle anymore, he used to tell us all that he will never die from cancer; that he’d rather go out in a blaze of glory. His instant death, while tragic in its own right, was not as devastating as it could have been. Take this with you, we don’t blame you, we are not angry about what happened, only when it happened because we didn’t get a chance to say goodbye. But Bennet was doing math with his oldest son, his most favorite pastime. Please don’t take blame for the actions of another.” With that Claire turns to see Kent waiting for her and they all walk out together with the rest of the family.

“Mom, you are remarkable.” Trent says.

“Yeah Mrs. M. I don’t know that I could have given solace to her, but you’ve shown us all that we can and that we should. Thank you for yet another one of life’s important lessons.” Keri says to her and gives Claire a hug.

“If Bennet was here he would be jumping around yelling from the top of that bench that his wife is the classiest woman around. I’m so proud of you sis. Really, so proud. Now if you can clone yourself into not being my sister I’d like to marry you.” Morgan says laughing.

Kent smiles as he was thinking of the same thing, who could he find for Morgan, a great guy.

In the morning after the trial everyone hears Claire scream and comes running to the kitchen. She is standing there holding the newspaper. “You’re not going to believe this. There was a court artist there during the trial, and look at this crap they drew. The caption says ‘victim’s wife stares in disbelief’ I think it should say, ‘help I can’t draw!!!’” She turns the picture around for everyone to see.

Trent looks at it and says, “I agree with the second caption. I mean the face isn’t too bad but since when did your neck grow so long?” he teases her.

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“I was looking up and over at the man’s wife, so I guess the artist thought I was straining my neck. The article is nice though. It gives credit to our lawyers for not arguing and for only pointing out the facts as they were without dressing anything up. And he made my hair too short, Bennet would have hated my hair so short.” She says more as a mumble to herself, “Come, let’s get ready for our day.”

~ ~ ~

The first anniversary of Bennet’s death is coming up. Trent has been doing well in school on account of his two uncles and his best girl. Baily and Julie have become even closer when they realized they have even more in common. Harry, true to himself, has enjoyed life as he always has. Claire’s sister had called her last night and asked for a private meeting today. They are going to meet at their favorite lunch place. “Hey, you ok? You sounded scared last night”, she says to her sister.

“Mom is not doing well Claire.” She says.

“Yeah, I know, she loved Bennet but that is not the problem, she isn’t doing well because I didn’t need her enough. I didn’t call her to come every day like she had called us when Dad died. She wanted to be needed and we didn’t need her enough to call her in. Morgan has been amazing, who knew he was such a good housemate? But being single had its advantages this time and he is loving living with us and us him. Mom visits on occasion and we let her make dinner. Truth is, most of the time, she buys take-out. She will be fine. We have the stone dedication that is coming up and that bothers her too.” Claire says.

“Why? Because you didn’t ask her what color to get?” her sister asks annoyed. All this time she has been made to feel guilty that her mother is alone. All those extra lunches with her and in the end, she would leave feeling bad that her mom is all alone. “Sorry, that was bitchy of me. She has been making my life miserable.”

“I know, I’ve told her to go out to the center with all of the people her age, that she should be social in her own peer group and she yells at me each time saying all her peers are dying and then I got angry and yelled back once and said well so are mine so deal with it.” Claire says. “Now, *that* was bitchy.”

Her sister and she begin to laugh. “She needs to leave the house and move into a retirement complex where they keep everyone busy all the time. She can still come visit us but she’d have a much better quality of life. She can afford to do this. Let her use her money on herself. Thank God none of us need her money. Extra is nice but we don’t *need* it. We’ll sick Morgan on her. He’ll get it done before Trent’s graduation I’ll bet.”

“Am I interrupting?” Kent says as he passes the café.

“Mom.” Claire says.

“I know the perfect place, same place my mom is at. They have their own room, it has a small kitchen they can make simple foods in or she can join the gang in the cafeteria. My mom is doing things now she never had time for. She goes dancing once a week. They have a gym but mostly it is run by physical therapists, only the residents don’t know that, they think they are getting personal trainers. The place takes them to the theater once a month oh and the funniest thing is, they serve them wine any time of day.” He laughs.

“Why the hell not, they deserve it and where are they going? No one is driving anywhere.” Claire says laughing with him.

“Mom hates those activities Claire, you know that.” Her sister says annoyingly.

“Really? No, she never had time, so she complains about other people doing them. Now she has time, hell she can even do karaoke if she wants or learn to paint. I don’t care, she simply has to remember to live the rest of her life and not wait for death to come knocking. It’s getting annoying. By the way the



stone dedication will be at 10:00 on Sunday. The actual anniversary is on Friday so this makes the most sense. Kent you’ll be there right?” Claire asks.

“Yes, the girls want to be there too you know.” He mentions

“Yeah, we’ve discussed this a few times, I told Bailey up until the cars pull out of the driveway she can still change her mind.” Claire says.

That night Claire discusses with Morgan and Trent what Kent said about his mother’s living place.

“I can’t picture Grandma doing activities at first, but she’d get used to the idea. You’re right Mom, why sit and wait for death to come when she can have a fulfilling life somewhere?” Trent tells her.

“Last I checked, if she sells the house, she makes all the money, house has been fully paid for, I believe for over 15 years now. So that will give her a nice nest egg to work from. I’m no Bennet but even I can do that math. The house, Dad’s pension and what she has already in savings could easily give her eight or more years before she has to think about money. At 76, I would assume that is good, no? Tell Kent to send me the info, wait, I can ask him myself. Be right back.” Morgan walks out of the room on the phone with Kent.

“Without Grandma’s money college may be harder for me to afford but your father put away enough for the first two years, so we will worry again after that.” Claire says to Trent.

“If it is all the same to you, Keri and I would both like to go to the city college near us so we can save money and stay home. Neither one of us is too keen on dorm life from what we’ve heard goes on. We will drive together to the campus each day and look for work in between class time. They have a major in art therapy and after last summer helping out the kids in that camp. I think that is where I want to put my talents. I’ll still draw and maybe even illustrate as Dad had said, but helping lives through art sounds really appealing.” Trent answers.

“Is Keri still looking at nursing?” she asks.

“She realized over the summer that blood is not her thing, so no. She is thinking computer programming, maybe for games, she wants to concentrate on games that will help children learn life lessons, not only learn how to shoot or make things go splat. We’re a good team Mom.” He smiles.

“Yes, you two are a great team.” She smiles.

“Actually, I was thinking of you and me. But yes, Keri is definitely a new piece to our puzzle we call family. Can I ask you a personal question?” Trent asks.

“Sure honey, always.” Claire says.

“Since the first year is almost up, are you and Kent going to explore more than friendship? I wouldn’t mind. He is a great guy, dangerous job but great guy.” He looks at his mother in the eye.

“In the beginning we were always friends, we have become very close, that is true. He is too handsome to walk into my work, all the women there drool, quite unattractively by the way.” She laughs and so does Trent. “I think we’re going to let things evolve, or not. I think we will always be friends regardless. Doesn’t answer your question, but like Bennet, I’d like things to evolve rather than pick a title and define our relationship. I want Morgan to find someone too.” Claire looks around to make sure Morgan didn’t hear her.

But then sure enough he comes running in, “You’re not going to believe this. I spoke to Kent, well duh you know that but I called Mom right after and I didn’t give her a choice I told her I was taking her to dinner there to meet a friend, Kent’s mom and she agreed. Can you believe it? She agreed! Kent’s mom is at the place out in Warren Junction, only about 45 minutes from here. Can it be this easy?” he sits down after his ramble and grabs a cookie off of Trent’s plate.

“I know that place, wow, if Grandma would go there that would be really nice for her. We did that art festival there on their grounds two summers ago Mom, remember?” Trent looks at her for recognition.

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“Oh Trent, she loved that fair, I do remember. You’re right. Morgan, I hope this works.

~ ~ ~

The memorial is announced on the friends’ email list. Many came. People from the community came too. Claire’s mom is still missing, how could she not be here? She thought Gene was picking her up. She sends Gene a message, ‘Mom?’

*“Didn’t want to go, we just got her in the car – don’t ask. ☹️”*

Clair sighs, her mother has become ‘Ms. Melodrama’ since they brought up the idea of her moving. She loved to visit the place but moving there is like putting her out to pasture like an old used up work horse, she keeps saying. Claire has no use for drama, for some reason it annoys her more than anything else. She can tolerate a lot from people but drawing attention to oneself for the specific reason that you want attention especially for pity? She doesn’t understand this one bit. It is her only personal downside as she sees it, Claire hates self-pity. Have it, wallow in it, then move on. No one wants to see, hear or experience it with you every time they see you. She takes a deep breath, and of all days to pull this trick?

With everyone there now, Trent begins to talk. He thanks everyone for coming and for filling out the questionnaire he sent out. He begins to read everyone’s one line that they sent in. In the end Trent had done his magic and turned all their words into a poem that flowed so beautifully there was not a dry eye around. Keri stood proudly next to him during this. After the reading, they pulled the cover off of the stone and everyone sat there a moment to realize that Bennet is now immortalized in stone. Claire thought about putting math signs on the stone but no one would understand how much a part of him those signs were and people walking by might think it was tacky so she left it simple, that suited Bennet all the same.

At the house Claire’s mother’s phone began to buzz over and over. “Mom who are all the people you’re talking to now?” Claire asks.

“The women I met at that old people place, they knew what today was and are all sending me messages, the nosey bodies.” She says in irritation.

“Mom, I’m going to say this once, and only once. Stop being a bitch! You’ve made your life out to be this horrible mess when in reality you have more than most. You have your own house, still drive a car, and well I might add, you still can cook when you want to, your doctor says you could run marathons but you choose to stay at home and brood over your horrible life. I am sick of it! You were widowed at a normal age, your children are all grown and out of the house, your husband was retired. You had 10 glorious years of retirement together.

My husband had a five year old son he left behind and an eight year old daughter and a 17 year old son. All of whom he would give his life up for, he would have taken a bullet for; you too damn you, so stop this crap! You hear me?! I’m tired of it. My whole life has been wonderful, I don’t care that my first husband walked out, I’m stronger for it. I had Bennet for not long enough but he influenced my whole persona and that of Trent’s as well.

We are who we are because he believed we could be this. You?! You believe the world should still be mourning your husband. Well, no one does. How do you like that!! No one mourns forever and becomes spiteful like you. People move on, they grow. Now get up off your lazy ass and move to a place where you obviously can make friends easily and have a life. They aren’t being nosey, they are being concerned. Stop pushing the world away and join the land of the living it’s a beautiful place and you know it! I’m really done here.” Claire turns sharply and walks away from her mother, leaving her with her mouth open.

Morgan had been standing there and heard the whole thing, their mother looks at him and all he can do is nod in agreement. Then, he too walks away but to find Claire and see if she is doing well after that

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tirade. He finds her outside by her garden, she is looking down at a patch of weeds. He puts his arm around her shoulder, “Damn girl, when you let go, you let go. Feeling any better?” he says.

“No Morgan, I feel like a heel. But she needed to hear me. We all lost our dad then, we all loved him and we also all understand that the right partner will be with you forever in your heart but to become this bitter woman who pushes everyone away? I think it is selfish and I hate it. I’m sorry, and today of all days she tries to pull that shit on me? I’m not giving her sympathy because she actually has people who sent her condolences. I welcome all that I receive. Everyone lost a wonderful man when Bennet died.

But without him dying I would not have grown so close to you as I am now. You can live with me forever, even if we both get married we will buy a bigger house. We’re partners in life now, I see that and I’m sorry if I ever shut you out.” She says holding Morgan’s hands.

“Aw Claire, you didn’t shut me out. We’re eight years apart, which is forever as kids, but as adults it doesn’t matter. I’m the cool young uncle who can still burp the alphabet after drinking seltzer. You? Well you’re the mom and you have to be serious when I don’t. But I sure would love what you had with Bennett. Really, I would. I love my job, I love your kids, but I think I’m finally ready to want the rest life has to offer too. Do you think Gene is there cleaning up as he always does?” he asks.

“No, I think everyone is tired of her drama, especially when she pulled it this morn and almost made him late for the memorial. She could have a full life but he is choosing death, I don’t want that around me or my kids. I’m sorry.” She says again.

“Don’t be sorry for any of what happened. Hey Morgan, there is a woman inside looking for you. She says she goes by Emmy. A real beaut too. Oh, and Harry says you promised him ice cream if he didn’t pee in the car so he is waiting.” Kent says. Morgan quickly leaves to find Harry and this mystery woman.

“I don’t realize if you know this, but a lot of people heard you yell at your mom. No one is faulting you at all, many had smiles on their faces because I think it is the first time they saw you express anything except that life is always good. Your mom asked Gene to take her home and he said no, he wasn’t ready. He told her if she wanted to lay down in the guest room, he will come get her when he is ready to go with the rest of his family.

Unfortunately, you can’t make her choose life, she may still choose to be sour but I think what happened here is that you told her you won’t accept her sorrow around your family so she had to change while she was here. With your siblings backing you up, that will go a long way. You want to sit down?” Kent asks her softly.

She takes his hand and he leads her over to their picnic table. They sit across from each other and are holding hands. “Claire?” he asks to see if she is in the same world as him right now.

“I choose life Kent, always life. This is what Bennet taught me. That even though my first husband was a piece of garbage, he taught me that doesn’t define me, that he didn’t define me. Only me. I’m the only one who can decide. He taught that to Trent too and that made his father’s dismissal of him take on a whole new meaning. He saw that his father had to leave and it had nothing to do with him or me; that it was all about his father’s choices.

I choose life Kent because who wants to wallow in misery but sometimes I will miss Bennett so much it hurts and I will cry. Sometimes I will feel that life has given me lemons and you know what?” she looks at him.

“No, what Claire?” He asks with patients.

“I don’t like lemonade. I’ve come to realize sometimes lemons are simply lemons.” She says with a tear running down her cheek.





“Yes, sometimes if we accept the sour the sweet times will be even sweeter. Like when you will be watching Trent graduate from high school in a few short weeks.” Kent says. “Or the moment we share our first kiss.” There he said it, Kent holds his breath.

Claire looks him in the eye and sees tears there too. “Yes, Kent. Like that moment too. But today, today is lemons with a capital L.” she smiles at him.

Graduation day. Trent can’t believe it is here, he can’t believe that Bennet is not here. He spent an hour on the phone with his uncle Gene last night crying about missing his father. He took a shower then went downstairs and cried with his other uncle. After dinner he cried with his mother. Now his tears are dry but his heart still hurts.

He had heard Kent and his mom talking after the memorial, although they didn’t see him, he felt he had to check on her after what happened with his grandmother. Mom was right, some days are simply lemons and we need them to be. The knock on his door startles him. Keri walks in, her cheeks are streaked from tears, he jumps up to greet her and they hold on to each other for a long time, letting the final tears fall he didn’t know he had.

When they are done. Keri says, “Today is the same date my brother graduated, same day of the week too. I’ve been downstairs crying with your mom. I’m so spent. We need to appreciate today. We are graduating. High school graduates, when we started high school, this day was so far ahead I felt that a day like this would never come. That I was not good enough to get here. But here I am, and here you are and we’re going to take the world on by storm as the saying goes. We have goals to meet and we are going to do them together, we are going to do all of it, together.” She smiles at him.

Trent smiles, he walks away to get something out of his desk, the small pink box he has been staring at for three days since he and his mom were at the store. “Happy graduation.” He says and hands the box to her. She hates pink, so for him, this is part of the fun.

Keri looks down and takes the box hesitantly, he knows she hates the color pink so he must be laughing at himself now. She opens the box and sees a very small ring that is made up of a single word written in script, when she looks down again and turns the ring, she sees the word ‘forever’. Each letter filled with Trent’s birthstone, emeralds. There is a ruby at the base of the letter v, this is the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. “Mom helped me pick this and Uncle Morgan insisted on the ruby.” Trent says watching her take this all in.

Keri jumps into his arms and he holds her close and twirls her around, he sets her down slowly and there in his room, he seals their fate with a kiss on the lips. Their first kiss.

“Trent!!! We have to go!!!” Bialy calls from downstairs.

“Graduation.” she says softly.

“Yeah.” He grabs his cap and gown off of his bed and his other hand is holding Keri’s free hand. When they get halfway down the stairs they hear popping noises and all of sudden streamers are falling all around them. The two graduates begin to laugh. Only his family would start a celebration early.

“What?” Uncle Morgan says. “I was supposed to wait?” he laughs and so does everyone else as they head out to the cars. The original plan was for the graduates to go in their own car and then be home for a late family dinner. But as Trent and Keri stand there, they walk to his mother’s car.

“Can we squeeze in?” he asks his mother.

Morgan jumps out of the car and says, “Whew, now I can go pick up my date and meet you there. Love you all!!!!” he calls over his shoulders as he runs to his car. Claire smiles at her son, “Are you sure?”

Keri answers for them, “Forever sure.” Who better to celebrate with then a family that loves you? The kids from school, she will never see again and she is not so sure she will miss most of them.

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Emmy and Morgan have been dating since the memorial. She is Kent’s cousin and has been his confidant on all things Claire since the accident happened. Once he heard Morgan was ready to really date, she is the first person he thought of. She had seen Morgan’s picture and was already interested in meeting. So far, things have been great.

“I’m thinking of a pizza party lunch after graduation and if you still want to bar b que later mom we can. Keri challenged me and said her sauce is better than mine, I think she needs to prove herself.” Trent says.

“Well, Keri honey, don’t your parents want to be with you?” Claire asks.

“Are you kidding? When you invited them to dinner tonight, they were thrilled. It gave them the excuse to tell all of my family, that they don’t like anyway, that they were already invited out to a celebration and won’t be making one themselves because who makes one that isn’t on the day of graduation? My mom loved every call although she did inform me that my gifts would be smaller and I laughed. Wait till she sees this ring!! She loves you already Mrs. M. and Trent, she loves him too.” Keri says smiling up at her forever boyfriend.

“As long as you’re sure, we aren’t ones for causing family problems.” She says.  
~ ~ ~

Now halfway through the summer after graduation, Claire is feeling a bit melancholy. She used to take these long walks with Bennet and they spoke of nothing. She has been walking the same path by herself for over a year now and it doesn’t have the same feel. A lot of what she had done with Bennet doesn’t feel right. She changed the sheets in her room because laying on the old ones was no longer comfortable. She sits down on the bench and watches people walk by.

Couples holding on to each other, children riding on fathers’ shoulders, mothers running to catch up to small children. Life, life right before her and yet she isn’t feeling much like life right now. Morgan and Emmy have become very serious in a short time, she sees and feels the love between them. Keri and Trent are the definition of true love, young and totally dedicated to each other and each other’s needs and dreams. Their lives complement each other and Keri loves being in her house, which makes Claire happy.

Baily decided to go to dance camp with Julie and Morgan drops them off each day before he goes to have breakfast with Emmy. Her mom put the house up and had bids right away, she is moving to the retirement community next week. Things are working out all around her but the one thing she has noticed today is that Bennet is still dead. No matter how many times she visits the grave, he is still dead. He has yet to come out from behind the stone and say ‘gotcha’.

And Harry? He is everything his father was; kind, social, loving to a fault, trusting, but strong for everyone. He always knows when Claire needs a hug, when Keri is frustrated and needs a kiss because school work is hard. Harry turned six and only wanted to play with trains all day, so they did, the whole family was in her basement playing with trains for hours. He was the happiest boy around.

But today, today Bennet is still dead. ‘lemons’ she clicks send and waits. No response, nothing. An hour later and she is still waiting, Claire decides maybe she had guessed wrong back on the day of the memorial. Maybe Kent was simply being a guy friend. She closes her eyes giving herself five minutes, she tells herself, to feel sorry for herself. Why today? What is today?

When she wakes up Kent is sitting next to her holding a stick up with big fluffy cotton candy on it. A lot of it. He smiles at her and before she can say anything, he leans over and kisses her gently on the lips. When he sits up he says, “I don’t like lemonade either but cotton candy makes anyone smile. I was out on a call. When I came back and saw your text I realized what today is.” He looks to her.

“You do? Because I don’t know at all.” She says.

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“Today is the day we turn sour into sweet. You put out a distress signal and I came running as fast as I could, I knew you’d be here. And yes, Claire, Bennet is still dead, I can’t change that and neither can you. But you always choose life, so let’s go live it. You’ve walked this path for almost ten years already. Now, let me show you a different one, there are different trees, different flowers, a cotton candy cart and a petting zoo along the way. A different life, choose life again.” He pauses. “Choose life with me.” He says softer.

“You know I really meant it, I really do hate lemonade.” Claire says.

“I know.” He answers smiling and standing up taking her free hand with him.

“I’ll need to go to the dentist after eating all this sugar.” She comments.

“I’ll help you eat, the sweet parts should always be done together, don’t you think?” he asks.

“Keri hates pink.” Claire says as a point of fact.

“Keri isn’t here, she’ll never know.” Kent smiles as he continues to walk with Claire to a completely different section of the biggest park in their neighborhood.

“I once heard that it is ok to keep some moments to yourself, that not everything needs to be shared.” She says as she squeezes his hand a bit more.

“You want to eat that by yourself?” he jokes.

“No, but I wouldn’t mind this moment going unshared, at least for today.” Claire smiles and steps closer to Kent to hold his arm and lean into him. “I choose life Kent, I do.” She whispers and peels off a large bite of cotton candy. It does make her smile. Kent smiles too.

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