



SECRETS OF

The Heart

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Secrets of the Heart

*The human heart has hidden treasures,
In secret kept, in silence sealed.
The thoughts, the hopes, the dreams, the pleasures,
Whose charms were broken if revealed.*

~ Charlotte Brontë

1. Brian (I)

Brian Littrell had heard it said that a person's heart is an ocean full of secrets. In fact, he had heard it said at least a hundred times, because he was pretty sure that line came from *Titanic*, and *Titanic* was his wife Becci's favorite movie.

But there was nothing secret about his heart. Not anymore. It had been scoped, monitored, recorded, x-rayed, scanned, and catheterized until his cardiologist knew every beat, every murmur, and every thing that was wrong with it. There were no secrets. The test results told only grim truths: a congenital defect had worsened; Brian's heart was failing; and if he didn't get a transplant soon, he was going to die.

There was no time for secrets.

At first, he'd told only the necessary people: his wife, of course, and his family – Mom, Dad, his older brother. He and Becci had even tried to explain to Calhan, who was, after all, only a year old and much too young to comprehend how sick his daddy really was. But then the necessity had extended to others: his boss, his coworkers, and, eventually, the students at West Jessamine High School, where Brian had been employed as the choral director for a decade.

The last brought him full circle, for it was in front of his students that he had almost collapsed one day last winter, in the midst of rehearsing for the annual holiday concert. At the time, he'd made light of it, using his sense of humor to clown around his embarrassment. "And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why I always tell you, never lock your knees on the risers!" He'd earned a few chuckles, but hadn't missed the nervous looks the kids exchanged for the rest of rehearsal. Not that he could blame them. The incident had alarmed him too, enough to send him to his doctor's office. And that was where it had all started: the scoping, monitoring, testing process that explained why he was now here, at home in bed, sucking down oxygen from a tube when he should have been using his own supply to teach a bunch of teenagers how to sing.

Brian inhaled a little deeper and released the pure oxygen through a sigh, lifting the remote in his hand to change the channel on his TV. He didn't understand the appeal

these soap operas held for the average housewife. Every one he'd tried to watch seemed to have about fifty different characters, yet moved so slowly that a single conversation between two of them took the whole episode. In essence, nothing happened, and yet, over the course of a week, ridiculous things happened. It was all too melodramatic for him; who needed poorly-scripted drama when they were dying? That was real drama, and Brian had plenty of it. Yet there was nothing else on TV in the middle of the afternoon.

He gave up and turned off the set with a click. The picture on the screen faded to black, and a faint crackling dissipated into a heavy silence. Brian's gaze moved to the window. In the summer, while he was out of school, he never watched TV during the day; he was always outside, playing with his family, or doing yard work, mowing the fresh grass, planting, watching things grow. But the greenness of summer was long gone now, and sometimes, Brian wondered if he'd ever see it again. Through this window, he'd watched the leaves turn to the vibrant, golden colors of autumn, then fall from their branches and curl upon the ground, dull brown with death. In another month, the trees would be bare, the grass frosted over until it, too, was dead and brown. The school choir would be rehearsing for the holiday concert, and for the first time in ten years, Brian would not be there to lead their rehearsals.

He'd been well enough to finish out the last school year, six months after his fatal diagnosis. But in the peak of summer, when the days were at their longest and the cool nights a pleasant relief, his decline had begun. By mid-August, he was on home oxygen therapy, and teaching music classes seemed out of the question. With reluctance, he'd requested and was granted medical leave, allowing someone else to take over his two choirs. He'd stayed away from school, wanting to send the message to his students that this new director was *the* director, and there should be no confusion over that. Yet he hoped to make the holiday concert, if he hadn't gotten a new heart by December.

December would mark a year since his diagnosis, a whole year that he'd been slowly dying. He wondered how much longer the process could last. At what point would his weakened heart decide it couldn't force another beat and simply stop? Would it be before Christmas? After the new year? Without a new heart, could he make it to his birthday in February? He'd be turning thirty-four. Almost middle-aged, by all accounts, but if you looked at the big picture, a thirty-four-year-old heart was still young. Hearts three times the age of his beat with more strength than his heart beat now.

In the silence, as he lay against his pillows, head turned toward the window, Brian could hear the beat in his ears. It was syncopated, uneven, and it raced with a tempo that was too fast for a person just lying static in bed. "Stay with us. You gotta feel the beat," he'd urged his percussionists in the orchestra he'd conducted during his student teaching. Instruments weren't his forte like vocal music was; he could tinker on the piano, strum chords on a guitar, and work the valves on a trumpet, but that was about it. If there was one thing Brian Littrell knew, though, it was rhythm. Rhythm was the backbone of music. Without the steady beat of the bass drum, the rest of the orchestra would collapse. That was what he'd told his bass drummer, Freddie Collins, after school one day, as they stayed late to practice quarter notes, drumming out an eight count that

lasted until Freddie could keep the beat without Brian stomping it next to him. Now, it seemed, the drumming of Brian's heart was worse than Freddie's. It rushed ahead, then skipped a beat, as if to keep itself in check, and when Brian thought of the blood slogging through it, he felt light-headed.

He remembered how Dr. Robert had explained it to him: "Your heart is, of course, a pump," the cardiologist had begun. "Newly oxygenated blood enters the left side of your heart from your lungs and is pumped to the rest of your body. It comes back to the heart on the right side, which sends it back to the lungs. But your heart has a defect, a large hole between the left and right ventricle. This means that every time your heart beats, some of the oxygenated blood in the left ventricle sloshes over into the right ventricle and is pumped straight back into your lungs, even though it already has oxygen. Therefore, your heart is having to work harder to get enough blood to your other tissues, and over time, this has enlarged and weakened it. The left ventricle has started to fail; it doesn't have the strength to keep pumping blood as well as it once did, and now you have a back-up of blood that it can't bail out. The murmur I hear when I listen to your heart is the blood leaking into the other ventricle."

He thought he could hear it now, the muffled whooshing that accompanied each sickly beat. It was like the ticking of a time bomb, one which had no visible clock. He couldn't count down, because he didn't know what number he was starting from, yet he knew that each passing second, each rush of blood in his ears, brought him closer to death. Just as the bomb would explode, his heart would eventually stop, and there was no guarantee of being able to reset the clock. Listening to the death march of his heart made him feel woozy, and as a clammy sweat broke out on his forehead, he lifted his head from the pillow and took a deep drag of oxygen from the thin tubes in his nostrils. He felt weak, drained, yet he couldn't let himself lie down again. He felt like the madman in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" – hearing the heart beat was going to drive him insane.

So he sat up again, adjusting his pillows behind his back, and resignedly turned the TV back on, grateful for the noise. Martha Stewart was on now, which meant Dr. Phil was next, and then Ellen DeGeneres, at which point Becci would come home from work and flip to Oprah to see if her show was more interesting that day. It usually was, by Becci's standards – she liked the serious topics, while Brian preferred the much funnier Ellen.

Two more hours, and Becci would be home, having picked up Calhan on the way. Brian couldn't wait to see his wife and son. These dying days were so long, yet the weeks seemed so short. To think, Becci had already been in school two months. Two months, and still no heart. They'd both hoped it would come over the summer, while they were both off work, so she wouldn't have to take time off from her teaching job. But although Brian had moved up on the transplant list with the summer's decline, no heart had come, and Becci had started the year with a new batch of fourth-graders like usual. Her school knew the situation and was prepared to hire a long-term sub after the transplant, when she would be needed at home to help care for Brian. But first, there had to be a heart. And there was no timing when the right person might die.

Brian's eyes strayed again from the TV, this time to the small, black pager that lay amid the prescription bottles on his nightstand. When it happened, the pager would go off, and Brian and Becci would make the drive into Lexington to see if there was a match. So far, the pager had been only silent and still. Brian tried not to get his hopes up over the first time it might vibrate. Over the summer, when he'd still felt well enough to sit up at the computer, he'd scanned enough transplant support forums to know that there were often false alarms. Indeed, sometimes in the plural. He might rush to the hospital only to find that the donor heart was not viable after all. Antibodies might keep it from being a perfect match. He might have a fever or the sniffles; even the slightest sign of an infection would be enough to postpone the transplant and give the heart to someone else. But there had been no heart at all, and the pager remained as static as the day Dr. Robert had handed it to him.

No heart...

Dr. Robert...

Dr. Phil...

The scattered thoughts blended into one, as Brian dozed off to the drone of the television, his head lolling to one shoulder. He awoke with the sound of the front door closing, and his chin snapped up from his chest as he looked around, suddenly alert. Ellen was dancing across the TV screen; it was four o'clock. Becci was home.

She swept into the room, balancing Calhan on one hip. In one smooth movement, she bent to kiss Brian, plopping the toddler down on the bed. As his wife straightened up, the faint scent of her lotion lingering in the air, and as his son crawled into his lap and clumsily patted his face, Brian smiled. This was the best part of his long, melancholy days: when his family came home, and the three of them could spend time together. Each moment was more precious than ever, under threat of the ticking time bomb with no exact number.

"How was your day?" he asked Becci, as she began to move about the room, changing from her school clothes into her sweats.

She paused in front of the large dresser to unfasten her jewelry. "Long," she sighed, flashing him a tired smile in the mirror. He smiled back at her reflection. She was pretty in an old-fashioned way, not stunning by today's standards, but sweet-faced, with a fair complexion that flushed easily, expressive gray eyes, and dark brown hair styled in a short bob. In the ten years he'd known her, she had never treated her hair; it was always soft, always silky. She was forever running her fingers through it, as she did now, tucking back a lock that had fallen into her eyes as she lowered her head over her wooden jewelry box. "The kids have been keyed up all week," she added, carefully stowing her earrings and necklace in their proper compartments. "I wish Halloween would come and go already... and the week after, too. Nothing like twenty-five ten-year-olds who are all sugared up on the candy they ate for breakfast and brought in their cold lunches."

Brian chuckled, shifting Calhan in his lap. “Aw, c’mon. You love Halloween.”

“I loved Halloween as a kid. I love Halloween with *my* kid. I do not love Halloween with a bunch of other people’s kids who I’m expected to teach,” she explained in her matter-of-fact way, a smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth. She pulled her sweater up and over her head.

He watched her undress, admiring the curves of her body as she turned her back toward him. She was not a slender woman, but she had a classic, hourglass figure that he found attractive. It was wider on bottom ever since she’d had Calhan, and though she complained about wanting to lose the rest of her baby weight, he didn’t see her ever going back to the same body she’d had when he’d married her. But then, her breasts were larger now too, and so it all evened out. She unhooked her bra, sighing with relief as its loosened straps slid down her shoulders, and he saw the red marks on her back where it had dug into her white skin. Shoving the bra into her top dresser drawer, she took out a sweatshirt and pulled it on to cover herself.

“Much better,” she said with a smile as she crawled onto the bed beside him. She snuggled into him wearily, resting her head on his shoulder. “Your mom said Cal’s discovered a new game: catch the kitty!”

Brian laughed. “More like ‘chase the kitty,’ I bet. I can’t imagine Missy would actually let him catch her.”

Becci laughed too. “No, but not for a lack of trying. Grandma said you ran all over the house trying to grab her tail, didn’t you?” Her voice lifted as she spoke to Calhan, chucking him playfully under the chin. He giggled, squirming away, and Brian smiled, watching him.

His son was him in miniature; everyone was shocked by how alike they looked. Same blue eyes, which crinkled at the corners when they smiled. Same long noses that scrunched up as they laughed. Same wispy curls, though Calhan’s were blonder. Brian imagined they would darken with age, as his own hair had. At his parents’ house, where Calhan went for daycare while Becci worked, there were plenty of pictures of Brian as a child, and his relatives constantly marveled over comparing the two.

“Uh-oh... better watch out. I don’t think Missy likes having her tail pulled,” Brian warned Calhan, grimacing as he imagined how his mother’s elderly cat would hiss and spit if the baby did manage to get hold of her switching tail. But he wasn’t really concerned. He knew his mom wouldn’t let the “game” go that far; she was as protective a grandmother as she was a mother, and she doted on her grandson.

“Maybe we should get a cat of our own, so we can show him how to treat one,” Becci said off-handedly.

“Or a dog. A small dog,” he added, smiling. They’d never been able to agree on the best pet; Becci was a cat person through and through, while Brian preferred dogs. Maybe they’d wait until Cal was old enough to have a say and let him cast the deciding vote.

“Ha. Never mind the pet. What do you want for dinner?” she asked, swatting his thigh as she straightened up, swinging her legs over the edge of the mattress to get up again.

“Whatever you feel like fixing. Want some help?”

“I’d love some company, if you feel like it,” she returned his offer with a smile.

“Definitely. I need a change of scenery,” he replied, sitting up straighter himself. Becci nodded. She scooped up Calhan and set him down on the floor, then extended her arm to Brian. He took it, holding on to the oxygen tube with his free hand to keep the line from tangling as he got up. He moved slowly, fighting the light-headedness that accompanied even the slightest exertion. She was ever patient, standing by until he was ready, steadying him when he finally gathered the strength to stand. She picked up the small oxygen tank that sat next to the bed and carried it with her as they walked up the hallway at the pace of a couple of ninety-year-olds.

It had humiliated him, at first, to have to depend on her like this. He was the athletic one of the two; he’d always been in shape, active, full of energy. He’d coached girls’ basketball at the high school for eight seasons before Calhan was born. He’d never imagined that a mere two years later, just walking to his own kitchen and back would seem as tiring as running ten suicides. He hated the sedentary life he’d been forced to adopt, but there was no way around it. He no longer had the stamina to be up and about very often; fatigue and vertigo were his constant companions. And Becci, who had taken on the role of caretaker to a husband as well as a baby without complaint. When he got his new heart, he vowed to make it up to her.

He was breathing hard by the time he sank down onto the kitchen chair Becci pulled out for him, and once again, he felt the erratic thrumming of his heart in his ears, as the rush of blood brought color back into his face. He sat back to visit with Becci as she made dinner, keeping an eye on Cal, who pushed a toy car around his feet. A few months ago, Brian would have been on the floor with him, making the cars crash with lively sound effects that made his son shriek with laughter. But now, he could only watch.

When he got his new heart, he would make it up to Cal too.

When... it was all a question of *when*. And the question became more crucial with each passing day. A long wait for a heart, which had once seemed feasible, no longer seemed so. Brian was getting weaker and sicker every day, and although he’d been bumped to the top of the waiting list, there was still the matter of waiting. How much longer would he have to wait? Another day? Another week? Another month? Or just until the time bomb in his chest ticked down to its very last second? Waiting game over. Final score: zero.

A cold sweat that had nothing to do with exertion broke out on his skin, and he felt the blood drain from his face again. He sucked in deep lungfuls of oxygen to slow the numbered beats of his palpitating heart. Then he closed his eyes, and there, sitting alone at the kitchen table, he prayed. He prayed swiftly and silently the same plea he knew Becci, too, made to God each night when they went to bed: that the answer to the question of *when* would be *soon*.

2. AJ (I)

The village of Lockland, Ohio sits on the northern outskirts of Cincinnati. It is an industrial town, founded in 1828 along the Miami-Erie Canal. The canal, with its four locks for which the town was named, is no longer in operation; Interstate 75 now runs through the old canal way. Take Exit 12, turn right, and you'll find Lockland. Most of its residents are blue-collar workers who make their living as laborers, construction workers, truck drivers, and mechanics. Most of its teenagers land their first jobs in food service. Some stay on long enough to rise through the ranks to management positions. Others follow in their parents' footsteps, becoming the next generation of the blue-collar sect. The few who are lucky enough to go away to college after high school rarely return. As a result, the town's population of almost four thousand has fallen since the later part of the twentieth century.

Lockland entered the twenty-first century as a town in decline, kept alive thanks to its factories and close proximity to transportation routes, namely the interstate and railway. Most other businesses went under in Lockland, and only an idiot would try to open a retail store there.

Then I, thought AJ McLean, must be an idiot.

He sat alone in the back room of his shop, poring over the month's figures. The store had done a fair amount of sales, but after rent, taxes, loans, payroll, and advertising costs, including the billboard on I-75, he'd made no profit. Sighing, he dragged his fingers through his receding hair. It was no wonder he was not quite thirty and already going bald. It was the same story every month: despite his attempts at marketing, budgeting, and improving the overall efficiency, his shop barely broke even. Some months, he even lost money. After two years, he'd expected it to be different.

Alexander James McLean was six months shy of twenty-seven when he followed a girl from his hometown of West Palm Beach, Florida to Cincinnati, Ohio. It seemed like a risky move, but then, what did he have to lose? Sadly, not a whole lot. He'd spent the better part of his twenties meandering from job to job, without a college degree or a clue as to what he aspired to be. His three loves in life, besides women, were music, tattoos, and booze, and he'd found work related to all three, in reverse order. He'd waited tables at a bar right out of high school, working his way up to a bartending position by the time

he was old enough. After three years of bartending, he'd taken a job at a tattoo parlor and stayed there for three more.

It was at the tattoo parlor that he'd met Jori, and the attraction had been instant. A year later, he'd found himself living with her in a ramshackle apartment above a hair salon in Lockland, where the cost of living was lower than in the city. When the salon went under, he'd leased the space on sudden inspiration and embarked on a new business venture, devoted to the last and greatest of his passions: music.

The image in his head had been vivid from the start: a record shop, like the vintage vinyl stores he'd perused in his adolescence, specializing in classic, retro, and indie music, music memorabilia, and an eclectic range of products to fit the tastes of other free spirits and old souls. Bringing that image to life had taken a lot longer. Without a college degree, he had no knowledge as to how to start a business, and few resources. That Vintaj had ever made it to opening day was a miracle.

It was a miracle he could only attribute to the miracle worker himself: Howie Dorough. Howie was an old friend of AJ's from Florida, the only one from their circle to have gone to college. He had earned his business degree in Orlando while AJ was moving up the ranks at the bar, and after making a good living working for other people's businesses, he'd been well-equipped and open to the idea of starting his own. He had entered the venture as a partner, adding his business sense to AJ's creative ambitions. Together, they had turned AJ's dream to reality.

Two years later, the old hair salon was unrecognizable, its walls painted with psychedelic murals and papered with old posters of The Beatles and the Stones, Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix. Its sinks had been replaced with glass merchandise cases, its styling stations with shelves and CD racks. AJ had predicted that by now, Vintaj would have either failed or thrived, but instead, it continued to hang by a thread, doing just well enough to stay in business, though never turning over a large profit. He had a lot of things working against him: small town, low incomes, music piracy. Surprisingly, competition from the larger chain stores wasn't much of an issue. Their mainstream music inventory attracted a different population than his offerings. Still, he faced an uphill battle every quarter to keep his dream alive.

It was past closing now, and Howie had gone home, but AJ continued to pour over the paperwork. Now was the worst time for his sales figures to flatline. He needed the numbers to peak, not plateau. He had a family to support now, and if the store failed, he didn't know what he was going to do. There was no way he could raise a child on a bartender's wages.

With a sigh, he rose from his desk and walked back out to the storefront, checking to make sure that the front door was locked and the neon sign outside had been turned off. Sure enough, the door was secure, and the glass tubes molded to spell out the shop's name, Vintaj, were dark. Satisfied, he left the store and trudged upstairs to the apartment above it.

Most people assumed the unique spelling of the store's name came from his own. But the J at the end of "Vintaj" didn't stand for his middle name, James. J was for Jori, his muse and his soulmate. When he opened the door, her voice rang out, "I'm in here!"

He had already known where to find her, and sure enough, when he followed the sound of her voice and the smell of fresh paint to the smaller of the two bedrooms, there she was, sitting cross-legged on the plastic tarp spread out on the floor, a paintbrush in one hand and a pot of rich, red paint in the other. His eyes followed the progress she'd made across the wall: rows of little red blobs, abstractly heart-shaped, spaced against a backdrop of greenery.

Sensing his presence, she turned her head, long hair whipping over her shoulder, and grinned. "Whatcha think?"

Her smile shone with pride and something more: the desire for approval. She wanted him to like it. He didn't have to pretend, and returned her smile easily. "It's gonna look cool, babe."

"I still have to add the green tops. And the little seeds." She cocked her head to the side, studying her work. "But yeah. I think it's gonna look cool, too."

"You about at a stopping place? I'll start dinner."

"I just wanna finish with the red."

"Okay." He left her to her painting and went to the kitchen, pulling out a couple of saucepans from the oven drawer, a bag of tortellini from the freezer, and a jar of marinara sauce from the cupboard. While the water boiled and the sauce simmered on the stove, he sliced a loaf of French bread and slathered the two halves with butter and garlic. Unlike a lot of guys, he enjoyed cooking, and making dinner was a job better left to him. Jori was a lot of things, but "chef" was not one of them. Besides, she had weird tastes when it came to food. She hated chicken, loved mayonnaise and peanut butter sandwiches, put lemon juice in her macaroni and cheese, and drenched practically everything else in ranch dressing. When it came time for dinner, she would wrinkle her nose at the marinara sauce and get out the bottle of Hidden Valley to pour over her pasta. And those had been her normal eating habits even *before* she was pregnant.

He'd met Jori Wilder when she was just nineteen, a college freshman on spring break in West Palm Beach. She had entered the tattoo parlor with a friend on a frivolous whim to get a permanent souvenir of their trip, and when he'd looked up from behind the front desk and made eye contact, a pleasurable jolt of adrenaline blazed through his veins, and his heart jumped as if he'd been shocked. He was not enough of a sap to believe in love at first sight, but lust? Oh, yeah.

It was electric, the instant chemistry between them; he'd been drawn to her at once. She looked different from the other girls in Florida, the tanned-to-a-crisp, blonde bimbos he usually saw running around in their bikini tops during spring break. Her skin was pale,

freckled by the sun but not tanned, and her hair was dyed a vibrant red rather than bleached blonde. It was otherwise unprocessed, hanging straight and natural down to the middle of her back. She wore no makeup, and though her face was blemished here and there, it was pretty. She had nice features, well-proportioned and delicate. Her eyes were a beautiful light blue, almost turquoise behind the curtains of red hair.

She wanted to get a tattoo, she'd told him, sweeping the hair out of her eyes.

Did she have an appointment?

No. She was a walk-in. Would they be able to fit her in?

Probably, but the wait might be an hour or more. Was that do-able?

She didn't mind waiting if it meant getting the ink done today. She was only here a week for spring break. Went to college in Ohio, she'd explained.

He'd guessed she wasn't a local. How was she enjoying her vacation so far?

So far, so good, but she'd only been there one night.

A wild one, by the glazed look of her friend, who was clearly hungover. The girlfriend had gone to sit down in the waiting area while AJ took the girl's information. Was this her first tattoo?

No, it would be her third. And she turned, sliding up her tank top so he could see the ink on her back: a small peace sign, embellished with curling flourishes, on the small of her back, and a colorful doodle of John Lennon on her left shoulder blade. It was Lennon's self-portrait, she explained with the pride of a die-hard, and look, there was his autograph below it.

She must be a Beatlemaniac, he'd inferred with a smirk.

She had nodded, beaming back at him. Oh yes. He should see her dorm room.

In that moment, AJ had never guessed that he would actually go to Cincinnati to see her, that their meeting that day would lead to anything more. But the small talk and banter they'd tossed back and forth as she waited had progressed to a real conversation, and before she left the parlor that afternoon, sporting a tiny dove on her right ankle, he had her number programmed into his phone. He had told himself to let it go; she lived in Ohio, and besides, she was way too young for him. But against his better judgment, he'd called her that night, and a one-night stand had turned into a week-long fling. They'd kept in touch, and three months later, she'd called to tell him she was dropping out of school and looking for an apartment. He'd moved to Lockland in June.

Her parents, the shoe salesman and librarian who had raised her in a small town in Indiana, still didn't approve, and though his mother, the only family he was close to, was

more open-minded, she missed him terribly. But none of it mattered. He loved Jori Wilder, and she loved him, and now, more than ever, they were determined to make it work. For each other, and for their baby.

While the garlic bread was baking, he went back to the baby's room to check on Jori. She was still painting strawberries; there were spatters of red paint on the front of her tattered "Dark Side of the Moon" t-shirt, which was stretched taut over the pregnant belly that took up most of her lap. "You better quit soon; these paint fumes are getting strong," he chided her, waving his hand beneath his nostrils. "We don't want little Lucy born with a second head or something."

"Since when does wall paint cause two-headed babies?" Jori shot back, still making artful strokes against the wall. "I'm almost done. For now."

This had been her winter project, painting the baby's room. She hadn't kept it simple. No daughter of hers was going to sleep in a room with pale pink walls and pastel teddy bears. Her design for the nursery was creative, inspired. It was a colorful tribute to her favorite band, and she'd spent the last few months painting a sprawling mural that went across the universe, with its colorful, swirling galaxies and spatters of tiny stars, to a lovely marmalade sky with the sun coming up over the tangerine trees and blackbirds spreading their wings to fly, to the lush green of the strawberry fields, to the deep ocean, where a yellow submarine churned among the sea life. The ceiling was AJ's favorite: it was painted like the sky, light blue darkening into navy that faded into the inky black of the universe, and in the corner where they'd put the crib, the painted stars overhead seemed to glitter like diamonds, and there was a round mirror mounted to the ceiling so that when she awoke, Lucy Sky Diamond McLean could look up to see herself, Lucy, in the sky.

Naturally, Jori's parents hated the name even more than they hated the trippy paint job, but they had no room to talk: they had christened their daughter *Marjorie Jean*. It was after her grandmother, but Jori refused to let anyone call her that, and AJ didn't blame her. He couldn't think of a name that fit her less than *Marjorie*. And anyway, why should her parents complain? Lucy was a classic name, too, and a much prettier one at that. It was the middle names that bothered them, but that was Jori. AJ knew better than to try to convince her to change it to anything else. He hadn't convinced her that it wasn't practical to put so much time into painting a place they were only renting either. "If we move, I'll just paint over it," had been her flippant response. Jori did what Jori wanted.

He watched her now as she painted, her lips parted slightly in concentration. "And... there," she said, rounding off the last strawberry. She sat back to examine her handiwork. "I'll let these dry and add the finishing touches later."

"Perfect," said AJ, reaching down to offer her his hands. "Come on and rinse your brushes while I finish dinner."

He hauled her to her feet, and she followed him back to the kitchen, carrying her painting supplies. Her belly was so big now, it got in the way when she stood at the sink. She was eight months along, and in just a few weeks, Lucy would arrive.

The baby hadn't exactly been planned, but she would certainly be welcome. While Jori had always wanted to be a mother, AJ had never thought much about having children, until he'd knocked up his girlfriend. His first reaction when she'd told him had been shock, but the more he got used to the idea of being a father, the more he liked it. He couldn't wait to hold the little girl who had been growing inside her all these months. He vowed to be a good father, a supportive one, with an active role in his daughter's life. His own father had left his mother when he was just a baby himself, and AJ barely knew him. It would not be that way between Lucy, Jori, and him. When the time was right, he was going to marry Jori, and the three of them would be a family in every sense of the word. The kind of family he'd never had and, until this point, never realized he'd wanted.

Settling down and raising a child both excited him and scared him. It wasn't going to be easy. Jori had quit her job to work shifts at the shop and stay home with the baby once she was born, so it was up to AJ to provide for them both. Never had he had so much responsibility and so much at stake. If the record store failed, he failed. So while he looked forward to the new world of fatherhood, the weight of it pressed down upon his shoulders, growing heavier every month.

3. Becci (I)

The school day at Wilmore Elementary School begins at eight o'clock a.m., though the first students trickle into the cafeteria for breakfast at 7:40. By 7:45, the teachers are expected to be on duty. And so, quarter till eight found Mrs. Rebecca Littrell standing in the corridor outside her classroom door, where she waited every morning to greet her students as they arrived.

All teachers are, to some extent, actors and actresses. They feign enthusiasm over learning the rock cycle, the weekly spelling words, and long division, in hopes of inspiring genuine enthusiasm in their students. They pretend to like even the most unlikable of children, so as to boost their self-worth. They give "The Look" to the class clown, and their lips do not twitch, because even though they want to laugh too, they must be firm about their expectations for student behavior. They hide colds, teach through fevers and morning sickness, and give their directions charades-style when laryngitis claims their "teacher voice." They claim to hate missing a day of school, but really, they just hate writing sub plans. On most days, they love what they do, but on the days they don't, they still act as if they do. The classroom is their stage. They are teachers.

In the fall of her eleventh year of teaching, Becci Littrell was no exception. At 7:44, she was frowning, far away with worry over her husband, but when the bell rang a minute later, she was at her post, a smile pasted onto her face. “Good morning, Serena,” she said to the first little girl who rounded the corner.

Serena smiled back and echoed a soft “Good morning,” as she glided past Becci and into the classroom. She was the first child in the room each morning and the last one to leave at dismissal. When the final bell rang at 2:45, she trailed behind the pack of walkers and car-riders, but stopped short of the main exit. There was never anyone there to walk her home or pick her up; she was a latch-key kid, and on most days, she was at school longer than Becci was.

Becci peered into the room after her and watched as Serena dutifully went about the morning procedures, emptying her bookbag, stowing its contents in her desk, turning in last night’s homework. She was a bright student, thoughtful and dependable, and there was a wisdom, a maturity, about her that was uncommon in a fourth-grader. It separated her from the other girls in the class, made her different, and Becci sometimes wondered if the difference stemmed from the fact that she had no mother. She was being raised only by her father, a father who had to work long hours. Serena had no sisters, no brothers, and so she spent a lot of time alone.

Watching her, Becci thought of her own son, who was also – for the time being – an only child. With a pang, she wondered what Calhan would turn out like if something happened to Brian, and he was left to grow up without a father, without siblings. She cursed the thought the moment it entered her brain, but she couldn’t get rid of it; it was something she had been thinking about since the school year had started. From her years of teaching, she knew a lot about nine-year-old boys, but almost nothing about raising them. Her smile wavered at the next student who appeared, a tiny boy named Andrew who had a full wardrobe of Indianapolis Colts apparel. Studying the horseshoe logo on his sweatshirt, she realized she didn’t have the slightest clue what the Colts’ record was like this season. How would she ever raise a son without his father?

Jackie would help, of course. Her mother-in-law had done a wonderful job raising two sons of her own, Brian the youngest. She’d already had a hand in Calhan’s rearing, seeing him through diaper rashes and stuffy noses and the cutting of his first baby teeth this past year, while Becci and Brian worked and made trips into Lexington to see the cardiologist. It was only thanks to miraculously good timing that he’d turned one this summer and hit the two major milestones – first steps, first words – while Becci was out of school to witness them. Already, she feared she had missed so much in Calhan’s young life, and she knew Brian felt the same. Their son’s first year had been tarnished by Brian’s illness. When Jackie called Becci at school, her first thought was not, as the other young mothers’ would be, for her child, but for her husband. The secretary would ring down to her room and say, “There’s a phone call for you – it’s your mother-in-law,” and Becci’s blood would run cold, and her hand would shake as she pressed the phone to her ear and waited for Jackie’s voice to come on the line and give her the bad news: that Brian was worse, that he’d been rushed to the hospital, or, worst of all, that he was dead. She always sagged with relief when she found out that Calhan was running a

temperature or had bumped his head on the toy box – because neither seemed bad compared to the scenarios her mind had come up with.

Sometimes she felt she had no business teaching school this year, as distracted and overwrought as she was. But what choice did she have? Brian couldn't work, the medical bills were piling up, and someone's salary had to pay them. It was only necessity which forced her to drag herself to a job she had once loved, and now dreaded, because it took her away from her husband. Her worst fear was that Brian's heart would give out while she was gone, and he would die alone, without the comfort of his family nearby.

Tears threatened to start, there in the hall, as her thoughts got away from her, but she fought them back. It was ten till eight now, and the buses had all arrived; the students were appearing in groups of twos and threes. She refused to let them see their teacher lose it, and so she put her acting prowess to use, stretched her lips back into a thin smile, and chirped, "Morning!" as they filed into her classroom. If any of them noticed the moisture in her eyes or the shrillness of her voice, they didn't mention it.

The phone rang during reading groups that morning. "Finish reading the page silently," Becci told her small group, jumping up from the kidney-shaped table. She dashed across the room and caught the phone on her desk in mid-ring. "This is Mrs. Littrell," she answered in a rush.

"Becci, there's a phone call for you," came the school secretary's familiar voice. "It's your husband."

Both relief and fear flooded her heart; it sunk like an anchor to the depths of her stomach, making her feel queasy. If it was Brian on the phone, then the worst had not happened, but what if it was bad? What if he was sick... or, in any case, sicker? Her mind whirled through the possibilities.

"Put him through," she whispered, and her voice quaked.

They say that when you're about to die, your life flashes before your eyes. It had always sounded cliché to Becci, but in the five seconds it took for the call to be transferred, the last decade of her life, the life she had shared with Brian, played out in her mind like a movie on fast forward. Somehow, she already knew that, for better or for worse, his words were about to change it.

Becci had just turned twenty-two when she was hired for her first teaching job. She signed her contract *Rebecca Sue Callahan*, a week before her college graduation. In June, she visited Wilmore Elementary to see her classroom for the first time, and in August, she attended a two-day orientation for all the new hires in the Jessamine County Schools. That was where she'd met Brian Littrell.

He was twenty-three and as fresh-faced as she, having graduated from the University of Cincinnati in May. But while she felt overwhelmed and nervous about the start of the school year, he seemed totally at ease, even as he strode in a mere minute before the orientation was scheduled to begin. There was only one empty seat, the one next to her, and he sank down into it and leaned back, stretching out his legs beneath the table. As someone who was always prompt and felt rushed when she wasn't running ten minutes early, Becci thought he had some nerve, coming in at the last minute like that and not even looking stressed about it. But then he glanced over and smiled at her, and his smile was so friendly and charming that her annoyance melted away instantly. She smiled back shyly, admiring the blueness of his eyes and the way they crinkled at the corners.

"Rebecca Callahan?" he asked, squinting at her nametag, and she heard the twang of a native Kentuckian in the musical way her name rolled off his tongue. "Brian Littrell." He held out his hand.

"Becci," she corrected, taking it. He had a slight build, but a strong handshake; his grip surprised her as he pumped her hand.

"Becci. Nice to meet ya. Where ya gonna be teachin'?"

"Wilmore Elementary. Fourth grade." Despite her nerves, she still felt pride and excitement as she said it. "How about you?"

"I'm the new choir director at West Jessamine," he replied.

She nodded, smiling again. So he was a music teacher. It seemed to suit him.

"So, have you had much time to get your room ready?" she asked.

He flashed a cheeky grin. "Haven't seen it yet. They just hired me last Friday. School board hasn't even had a chance to approve it yet." He paused, and his eyes twinkled as he added, as if on a side note, "Hope I pass inspection."

Her eyes widened as she let out a shrill laugh. "Oh my gosh, are you serious? I'd be freaking out!" She studied his face incredulously; he didn't look fazed at all. "You're not??"

Brian shrugged. "I guess teaching high school music isn't the same as fourth grade. I figure they've already got some sheet music and stuff for me to start with; I'll just slap some posters on the wall this weekend."

She shook her head in disbelief; she had spent weeks working to get her classroom ready. Granted, he had a point – elementary was a lot different from high school, particularly high school choir – but even so, she could not imagine how anyone in his position wouldn't be freaking out.

She would find out later that Brian Littrell was not nearly as confident as he'd seemed. He hid his insecurities behind a good sense of humor and a positive attitude, just as she hid hers beneath makeup and nice clothes. On that first day of school in mid-August, she wore a dress and shook in her heels as she stood for the first time before her twenty-six fourth-graders. He wore a polo shirt and khakis and began his first period with a warm smile and a bad joke ("What do you call a gnome from the city? A metronome."), earning a few chuckles and plenty of groans from the freshman chorus. Somehow, they both survived their first year.

Novice teachers have a certain camaraderie with each other, but for Brian and Becci, a workplace friendship developed into more. They started dating the year they earned their tenure, when Becci's first class became Brian's freshman chorus. The year those same kids graduated from the Jessamine County schools, Becci left in May as Miss Callahan and came back in August as Mrs. Littrell.

Now, with her new batch of fourth-graders trying to read their teacher instead of their books, Becci Littrell clutched her classroom phone to her ear and listened for the soft drawl of her husband's voice. "Brian?" she asked.

"Guess what, Becs." His voice sounded breathy, but she could tell by its tone that he was okay. She relaxed in time to hear his next words, the words she had been waiting to hear for months. "The pager. It just went off."

4. Jori (I)

Jori Wilder was in the shower when she began to suspect she was in labor.

It didn't happen the way it did in the movies. She didn't suddenly cry out or double over with the pain of a contraction. There was no sudden spurt of blood or amniotic fluid. She was simply standing under the warm water, massaging her aching lower back with her soapy pouf, when it occurred to her that the crampy pains she'd attributed to lugging around her thirty-nine week belly might, in fact, be contractions.

Until that point, she had been relaxed, enjoying her shower. As she'd lathered her beach ball belly with soap, she'd thought about the baby inside, Lucy. She had always wanted a daughter, and AJ seemed thrilled they were having a girl, too. She wondered, as she often did, what Lucy would be like, whom she would take after. Would she be dark, like AJ, or fair, like Jori? Would she inherit Jori's wit or AJ's musical prowess? And which would she be more prone to: addiction or manic depression?

Despite how much Jori loved AJ, despite how excited she was to bring Lucy into the world, she sometimes wondered if it was a mistake to have his baby.

As a couple, they were perfect for each other. Seven years separated them in age, but one would never know it. Jori had always been worldly, and in some ways, AJ was just a big kid at heart. They had the same wicked sense of humor and knew how to make each other laugh. Both were wild, creative, and they shared an eclectic taste in music and fashion. Jori liked to think of herself as a modern-day hippie, while AJ's style was more gothic, but together, they were free spirits, grounded to their life in Lockland only by the necessity of money and the security the shop Vintaj provided.

Their lives had calmed down significantly once they had settled there, especially since Jori had become pregnant, but she still remembered what things had been like before. AJ had been an alcoholic when she'd met him. He'd never been treated as such, never officially even admitted to being one, as far as she could remember, and never let it interfere with his daily life enough to get him fired or arrested, but there was no denying he had abused alcohol for most of his twenties. They had dabbled in drugs together, mostly just pot, but she knew AJ had also gone through a cocaine phase. He'd kicked the coke habit for the sake of the record store, but it was Jori's pregnancy that had really forced him to straighten up. She'd given him an ultimatum: he would either stop drinking and drugging, or she would leave him. That was all it had taken. They'd both been clean and sober since then, Jori out of the necessity of not wanting to harm the baby, and AJ out of love for them both.

Jori did not consider herself idealistic to the point of ignorance, but she did believe in the power of love. It was love that had straightened out her man, just as it had fixed her, too. When she met AJ, she was nineteen years old, reckless, impulsive, and on the verge of flunking out of college. She thought of herself as a typical, collegiate wild child, living the party life and enjoying her newfound freedom and independence. Her psychiatrist called her manic. It was a drastic change from the depression she'd struggled with throughout her teens, and she was re-diagnosed as having bipolar disorder during the winter break of her freshman year. What followed was a three-month period of rapid cycling, which Jori was now convinced had been fueled by constant changes in her medication. In the midst of it all, while on a much-needed spring-break getaway with her girlfriends, she met AJ. Whether he alone was responsible, or if his entrance into her life just happened to coincide with her medication finally regulating, AJ McLean had triggered a turning point for Jori.

Four years later, she was happier than she'd been in a decade, without the aid of any medication. With AJ's support, she'd gone off the anti-depressants and mood stabilizers a year or so after they'd moved in together, and with his love, she'd stayed healthier and happier without them. *He* was her drug now, and she was his muse, and together, they were blissfully in love.

Yet she worried about both of them passing on their mental illnesses to Lucy. She didn't want her daughter to be depressed or dependent, as she and AJ had been. She wished only happiness upon her baby, and she hoped she and AJ would be able to give her the kind of life she deserved.

This was the train of thought Jori's mind had taken, as she leisurely rinsed the suds from her breasts and belly, running her hands over the curves of her body, feeling taut, firm skin and raised, bumpy stretch marks. Her pregnant body was nowhere near as beautiful in real life as in the artsy, nude photographs AJ had taken, month by month, or the plaster cast he had made of her belly. Still, she had enjoyed being pregnant, marveling over the drastic ways her body had changed in the last nine months. She just wouldn't miss having to use the bathroom every ten minutes, or the digestive problems, or the back pain.

The warm shower usually relieved such aches and pains, but as she stood there that morning, bringing her hands around to the small of her back, the water and steam did little to ease the cramps. And that was when she realized: she was thirty-nine weeks pregnant and almost certainly feeling the first pains of labor.

She didn't jump instantly out of the shower in a panic. Everything she'd read in books and on the internet said that labor could last a long time, especially in first-time mothers, and not to rush to the hospital at the first sign of a contraction. So she took her time, rinsing thoroughly, before she stepped out of the shower and wrapped her swollen body in a large towel.

AJ was downstairs, running the store, so she dressed in a comfortable pair of sweatpants and an oversized Beatles t-shirt, combed out her wet hair, and crept down the stairs to find him. He wasn't in the back room of the shop, and when she poked her head out into the main selling area, she saw only Howie, AJ's best friend and business partner, manning the counter.

"Hey, where's AJ?" she called over to him.

"Hey, Jori. He headed up to Troy - just left about an hour ago."

"To Troy? What??" Jori cried, hearing, for the first time, a faint note of panic in her voice.

"Yeah, to see a collector. I guess this guy died in a motorcycle crash, and his wife wants to get rid of all his stuff. Apparently, he had a great set of vinyl. AJ went to check it out, see how much she's asking. She only called this morning," Howie added, "so that's why he didn't tell you he was going. Why, is something wrong?"

Jori ran her hands over her belly and uttered a faint chuckle. "Well... nothing, except, I think I'm in labor."

"What??" Now Howie's voice rang out with that same panicked tone, as his eyes bugged practically out of their sockets. "Seriously? You're sure?"

Jori shrugged. "Not *totally* sure, I guess; I mean, I don't really know... but I think so."

“What should I do? Call AJ? Drive you to the hospital?” Howie bounced a little on the balls of his feet, reminding her of an overexcited Chihuahua.

“No hospital,” said Jori. “I’m doing a home birth.”

“What?? Really?”

“Yes, really.” Jori laughed at the look on his face. “Listen, don’t worry about it. It’ll be hours yet. I’m gonna go back upstairs and call AJ.”

“Well... what if...?” Howie hesitated; then his eyes lit up. “Wait, I know! Do you have a baby monitor yet?”

“Yeah, I got one at the shower.”

“Let me walk you up, and you show me where it is.”

There was no one in the store, so they left it empty for a few minutes and went back upstairs. Jori walked slowly, Howie right on her heels, apparently ready to catch her if she should suddenly topple over. At that point, she had a feeling she would only take him down with her.

Back in the apartment, she showed him into the baby’s room, now completely painted and set up to welcome Lucy. While Howie looked around, she found the monitor in the closet and took it out of its box. “Does it come with batteries? Great,” said Howie, taking one of the speakers from her. “Now, I’ll take this downstairs with me, and you keep the other one with you, and if you need anything, just holler, okay?”

“Okay,” Jori agreed, suppressing a smile at how neurotic he was being, way more so than AJ. “Thanks, Howie.”

“You bet.”

Howie went back down to the shop, his half of the baby monitor crackling in his hand. Jori took hers into the bedroom, where she kept her cell phone, and sat down on the bed to call AJ.

Some two hours later, Jori sat immersed in a pool of warm water, wearing her orange string bikini and clutching Howie’s hand.

“What time is it?” she demanded.

“Almost noon.”

“Where’s AJ?”

“He should be back any time now.”

“Well, where’s the fucking midwife?!”

“Relax, J-Wild,” chuckled Howie, squeezing her hand. “She’ll be here. I thought you said it was still early.”

Jori had thought so too, but now, she wasn’t so sure. If this was still early labor, she couldn’t imagine what it would feel like by the time she was ready to deliver. Her contractions had intensified tenfold in the last half hour, twisting and tearing at her insides with seemingly no relief. Over the phone, the midwife had told her to relax, that there was no way she could have progressed enough to be ready to push in such a short time, making it seem as if Jori were overreacting. Jori resented this. Sure, the midwife was more experienced, had attended many more births than Jori had endured, but only Jori could know how much pain she was in. She had always planned on a natural birth with little consideration for the alternative, but now she wondered how *anyone* who had been through this could advocate such torture.

“You have no idea how much this fucking hurts, Howie,” Jori growled through gritted teeth, fighting the urge to bear down. “*I* had no idea... no fucking clue...”

“The water’s not helping?” Howie asked, looking both sympathetic and completely helpless.

With Howie’s help, Jori had gotten out the birthing pool she had ordered, which looked a lot like the inflatable kind of backyard kiddie pool she had splashed around in as a child. It was deeper, though, and stronger, designed for the kind of abuse it would take when a pregnant woman was trying to push inside it. They’d inflated it an hour ago, and Howie had filled it with warm water. It was supposedly too early to get in, according to the midwife, but by that point, the pain had been so severe that Jori was desperate for the bit of relief being in the water might offer.

Soaking in the pool had helped somewhat, but she was still deeply uncomfortable, as she sat there, desperately waiting for her birth coach and midwife. She shook her head in response to Howie’s question. “Can you, like, distract me or something? Please,” she grunted, squeezing her eyes shut as a fresh wave of pain hit.

“Distract you how?” Poor Howie was completely out of his element. Jori knew he couldn’t wait for someone else to get there, so he’d be off the hook. He didn’t say it, but it was clear he thought she was completely insane for going about it this way. She was beginning to understand his logic.

“I dunno... How about you sing me a song?” She gasped, trying to remember the breathing techniques she’d learned in childbirth class. “AJ and I were gonna sing through the whole thing... so Lucy would come out to the sound of music and our voices.”

“Ah...” Howie’s tone was doubtful. “Well, what do you want me to sing?”

“Anything... Sing me your favorite song.”

“Um, okay...” Howie was quiet for a few seconds, apparently thinking, and then, to her surprise, he actually started to sing. *“When you’re down and troubled, and you need a helping hand... and nothing, oh nothing, is going right... close your eyes and think of me, and soon I will be there... to brighten up even your darkest night. You just call out my name... and you know wherever I am... I’ll come running... to see you again...”*

“Winter, spring, summer, or fall...” Jori chimed in weakly, her strained voice blending with Howie’s sweet falsetto, *“... all you’ve got to do is call... and I’ll be there. You’ve got a friend...”* She suddenly started to giggle. “James Taylor, huh? Is that really your favorite song?”

Howie stopped singing and shrugged. “Not really,” he said, looking slightly embarrassed. “Michael Jackson did a cover of it on an album I used to listen to as a kid. It just seemed like an appropriate choice.”

“Oh come on, Michael’s got way better stuff than that. Give me something upbeat,” Jori encouraged, leaning her head back against the side of the pool. She was only messing with him, but Howie was so anxious, he seemed willing to follow her every whim. By the time AJ got there, they were halfway through “Billie Jean,” Howie singing the lyrics, while Jori did her Lamaze breathing in time to the chord progression.

“Billie Jean is not my lover... She’s just a girl who claims that I am the one...”

“Hee... hoo... hee... hoo...”

“... but the kid is not my son...”

“Hee... hoo... hee... hoo...”

“She says I am the one... but the kid is not my son...”

“Somethin’ you wanna tell me, Jor?”

Jori sat up suddenly, sending water splashing up the sides of the pool. “AJ! You’re here! I didn’t even hear you come in.”

“I don’t doubt it,” AJ replied with a grin, coming around the pool to her other side. “That was a creative way of doing Lamaze. Maybe we should patent it, rake in some extra dough for the kid’s college. Whaddya think, D?”

Howie smiled gratefully. "I'm glad you're here, man," he said, and he sure looked it. "I had to close down shop; there was no one left to work it. You want me to open back up?"

"Nah... the screaming from upstairs might scare the customers." AJ winked at Jori, who could only manage a weak smile back. "Put a note on the door on your way out: *Closed for holiday.*"

"Holiday?"

"It's my daughter's birthday, dude! There should be commemorative stamps for this day!"

Howie laughed. "Alright. Anything else you need me to do for you before I take off?"

"Nah... enjoy your day off; you deserve it. Thanks for taking care of my woman."

"My pleasure," said Howie, who was being polite. Jori knew there could be no pleasure in babysitting a screaming whale in an orange bikini. She echoed her thanks before Howie left, making a mental note to get him a nice gift once this was all over.

And then it was just AJ and her. He kissed the top of her damp head and asked how she was feeling. She recounted all that had happened since he'd taken off that morning, haltingly, because the contractions were too strong to allow her to talk continuously. She kept taking breaks to moan and shriek and attempt to breathe through the pain. "This isn't right," she told AJ finally, looking desperately up at him with tears in her eyes. "This can't be normal. It hurts so bad..."

"Where's the goddamn midwife?" AJ looked around, as if expecting her to pop up out of nowhere.

"She's coming, but she told me there was no hurry. But I dunno how much more of this I can take, AJ..."

AJ stood up. "I'm gonna call her."

"Wait – will you just... check me first? Look down there and tell me how dilated you think I am?"

Her boyfriend went pale. "... What?"

"Oh come on, AJ, it's not like you haven't seen it before," Jori retorted in frustration. "Just look and see how big the goddamn hole is." She undid the ties on the bottoms of her bikini, which she'd put on only for Howie's sake, and pulled them off, spreading her legs and arching her back.

Looking revolted, AJ snuck a peek. "How do I know if you're, uh... dilated enough?"

“Well, is the opening big enough for a baby’s head?”

“No, no way... I don’t think so...”

“Okay...” Jori sighed. “I wish she’d get here soon.”

“I’ll call her.”

This time, Jori let him. He retreated into their bedroom to make the call, closing the door behind him. Through the walls, she could hear his muffled voice cussing out the midwife. But when he came back, there was a smile on his face, and he announced, “She’s on her way, babe!”

“Good...” Jori lay her head back again. She already felt weak and faint, exhausted, and couldn’t imagine finding the strength to push a baby out of her anytime soon.

“Can I get you anything, Jor?”

“Um... a glass of water would be great. I’m thirsty...”

“You got it.” He fetched the water, tipping the glass to her lips so that she could sip. Despite her thirst, she drank only a little; the cold water splashing into her empty stomach made her nauseous, too nauseous to even consider eating something. “Anything else?” AJ asked, when she pushed the water glass aside.

The contractions intensified before she could answer, and she squeezed her eyes shut again, gripping his arm. “God, just take my mind off it. Sing – that helped...”

As pleasant as Howie’s high tenor had been, nothing compared to AJ’s singing voice. It was sexy and soulful, powerful... She felt sure he could have had a career singing rock or R&B, if he’d pursued it. On that day, though, he chose to sing something different, something just for her.

“In the town where I was born... lived a man who sailed to sea... and he told us of his life... in the land of submarines. So we sailed on to the sun... ‘til we found a sea of green... and we lived beneath the waves... in our yellow submarine...”

Jori smiled, in spite of the pain, and chimed in, *“We all live in a yellow submarine... yellow submarine... yellow submarine,”* while AJ sang the lower harmony. *“We all live in a yellow submarine... yellow submarine... yellow submarine...”* She focused on the familiar lyrics, trying to block out the agonizing contractions.

“As we live a life of ease... every one of us has all we need...”

“All we need!”

“*Sky of blue...*”

“Sky of blue!”

“... *and sea of green...*”

“Sea of green!”

“... *in our yellow...*”

“In our yellow-”

“... *submarine.*”

“-submarine!” called Jori with her last ounce of will, before suddenly dissolving into tears.

AJ stopped singing, threw an arm around her wet shoulders, and pulled her to him. “Oh baby, baby... I hate seeing you like this. You sure you don’t wanna reconsider? I can take you to the hospital right now.”

She shook her head fiercely. “No. Women have been giving birth like this since... since the dawn of time. If they can do it... so can I. I just... didn’t think it would be so... *hard...*”

It was during this meltdown that the midwife, Barb, finally arrived. She still seemed under the impression that Jori was being overly dramatic, as she knelt down beside the pool and said, “Don’t waste all your energy crying, honey. You’re gonna need your strength when it’s time to push. Let’s see how close you are...” She snapped on a pair of latex gloves, and Jori parted her legs again to let the midwife look and feel.

“You’re only about five centimeters dilated, hon,” said Barb, patting Jori’s bare leg. “You still have quite a ways to go.”

“Only five?” Jori moaned desperately. “But it hurts so bad! You’re telling me I’m only halfway there? That it’s gonna get *worse?*”

“I know it hurts, Jori, but this is what you wanted, remember? A natural birth at home, with no drugs, no needles or scalpels... Think of how good it’s going to feel once you deliver Lucy, how nice it will be for her to be born in such a peaceful, comfortable environment...” Barb’s voice was calm and reassuring, but Jori found it hard to relax when she was in such agony. She tried, though, resting her head against the back of the pool once more and closing her eyes. She felt like passing out and waking up only when it was time to push.

And then it happened, quite suddenly: a white hot eruption of pain in her belly that jolted her upright again. There was pressure, and as she screamed, bearing down on

AJ's hand, she felt something release and looked down to see a significant spurt of bright red quickly diffusing in the clear water. The sight of blood instantly made her feel faint, but she thought at first, *She was wrong; this is it! I'm about to deliver!*

The pain was almost blinding, but she managed to look at Barb for confirmation, and it was then that she saw the look on Barb's face. It was not a look of excitement or encouragement, but one of alarm.

"What's wrong?" AJ demanded, and though he'd tried to sound assertive, Jori heard the tremor of fear in his voice. "Is she supposed to be bleeding like that?"

"No," said Barb, and her voice, too, was shaky. "No, she's hemorrhaging. It could be a placental abruption. We need to get her to the hospital immediately."

"What?!" Jori's voice rose, sounding faraway and distorted in her own ears, as if she were hearing it through a tin can. "No... I want to give birth at home..."

"It's out of the question now, honey." Barb spoke kindly, but firmly. "There's been a complication, and if we don't take you to the hospital right now, we might lose you or Lucy."

Hearing her daughter's name was enough to make Jori see reason, and she felt herself give a single, weak nod of consent. She was only half-aware of what happened after that. One moment, she was lying limply in the pool, on the verge of fainting from blood loss and pain, and the next, she was bundled in something warm and dry, being carried by a pair of strong arms – AJ's? – and then, having drifted in and out of consciousness, she found herself lying across the back seat, cocooned in whatever they had clothed her with, dimly aware of the sensation of movement, the car's tires speeding over the road beneath her. Vaguely, she heard AJ's voice calling her name.

"Jori... hang on, Jori... you're gonna be alright, baby... we're almost to the hospital..."

Hospital... she thought in anguish. Lucy...

Then she lost consciousness completely.

5. Brian (II)

Brian held the pager in his lap for the duration of the twenty-five-minute drive into Lexington, Kentucky. He rode in the passenger seat, his portable oxygen tank tucked between his ankles, while Becci drove.

Normally, when Becci drove, she did so one-handed, her left hand perched on the bottom of the steering wheel while her right elbow leaned against the armrest that

separated their two seats. Not today, though. Today, she sat up straight and leaned forward over the wheel, both hands clutching it in the proper ten and two positions, her grip so tight that her knuckles were white. Brian knew the city traffic made her nervous – in fact, before he'd gotten sick, he had always done the driving when they went out together – but that wasn't all this time.

"Relax, honey," he told her, over the low hum of the radio. "There's no hurry. You know it'll just be more waiting when we get to the hospital."

"I know, but the sooner we get there, the sooner they can start testing you, and maybe the better your chances for getting this heart." Her voice tremored. Brian sighed. He reached out to pat her thigh.

"I don't think it's first come, first serve, Becs. Don't get your hopes up. I told you, the nurse said I'd only been paged as a back-up. It probably won't be me today."

"But it could be," Becci insisted, stubbornly optimistic. "That's why we have to... God!" She slammed on her brakes as the traffic in front of her slowed, and their car jerked to a stop. "I don't get stop-and-go traffic. If everyone just kept *going*, no one would have to stop! *Go!*" she yelled, pounding on the steering wheel.

Brian suppressed a smirk. His wife had the patience of a saint, until you put her behind the wheel when she was running late. He shuddered to think what she had looked like speeding home from the elementary school to pick him up.

It seemed like Becci had just left for work when the phone rang. Really, she'd been there for an hour and a half already; Brian had fallen back to sleep, and it was the ringing of the phone that had awoken him. By the time he'd shaken himself out of his stupor enough to realize it and answer, though, the ringing had stopped, and all he'd heard when he'd picked up the receiver on the bedside table was a dial tone. It was then that the pager had started to vibrate, and he'd made the connection: the hospital was trying to reach him. There was a heart.

With shaking hands, he'd grabbed the phone again and dialed the number that had flashed on his pager. The hospital receptionist who answered had put on a nurse from the transplant team, who'd given him what few details she could. There was indeed a donor heart, which matched him in size and blood type. He wasn't at the top of the UNOS list, and he wasn't the only one in the area who had fit the preliminary match, but they wanted him to come to the hospital anyway and undergo some tests. It was possible that the other potential recipients who had been called wouldn't be perfect matches after all, in which case the heart would go to him.

It was a long shot, but worth the drive. As the sights of the city replaced the country scenery that surrounded their home in Wilmore, Brian marveled over the changes that had taken place just since the last time he'd been out and about. "Hey, they repainted the Walmart," he noticed, looking out at the newly tan exterior of the Supercenter.

“Mm-hm,” Becci responded, distracted, uninterested. Brian continued to stare out the window. A line of cars idled in the turn lane, waiting to turn into the sprawling parking lot, while others streamed out. Regular people, going about the everyday errands of their everyday lives. Nothing more than the typical worries on their minds: what to cook for dinner that night, what the credit card statement was going to look like that month, whether they could afford the brand name cereal or if they should stick to the store brand, if Michael was going to do well on his science test that morning, or if Jenny would make the soccer team.

There was nothing everyday about going in for a heart transplant.

“Was that the Chick-Fil-A they bulldozed?” Brian asked, trying in vain to keep both his and Becci’s mind on the mundane, as he puzzled over the pile of dirt and rubble where there had once been a small building.

“Yep.”

“I know you’re mournin’ the loss of that fine establishment,” Brian teased, trying to prod more than a one-word response out of her.

Finally, a smile. “Can’t say I’ve shed too many tears over it. You know their so-called ‘chicken’ always made me nauseous. The fact that anyone prefers Chick-Fil-A to KFC is a sin.”

“A sin? The fact that you think KFC is true Kentucky fried chicken is pure sacrilege, woman,” Brian shot back. “You Illinois girls don’t know nothin’ about authentic Southern cuisine. My mom’s fried chicken... now *that’s* some real Kentucky fried chicken.”

“Oh, don’t you ‘Illinois girls’ me, Brian Thomas Littrell,” Becci chided. “My dad grew up in Kentucky-”

“And you grew up in our fine neighbor to the north, so don’t you go actin’ like a native. You’re a transplanted Kentuckian, and as long as you keep that Yankee accent of yours, you always will be.

His words hung in the air. Becci had no smart reply, and he knew why. *Transplanted*. The word stopped them both in their tracks, reminding them why they were here, in the car together, heading into downtown Lexington on the middle of a Tuesday morning. Brian wanted to forget, to delay the reality a little longer. “Pity,” he said, “about the Chick-Fil-A bein’ gone, when I’ve got a perfectly good excuse to stuff myself full of their greasy goodness. Who cares about clogged coronaries when your heart’s failin’ all on its own?”

“You’ll want those coronaries in good shape when you get your new heart,” replied Becci, her voice sharp, determined. “Which is going to happen. Today.”

Brian chuckled, his own heart staccatoing with the first jolt of fear as she turned off the street and into the parking lot of Saint Joseph Hospital.

He rode in a wheelchair to the heart institute, where a nurse from the transplant team welcomed him with a bright smile and a warm handshake. “Mr. Littrell, I’m glad you could make it. I’m Rose; we spoke on the phone earlier this morning. If you’re ready, I’ll take you to your room; we’ll get you all set up for your tests and find out if today’s your lucky day!”

If you’re ready... How could he ever really, truly, be ready? It was practically a paradox, this business of waiting for a transplant. On one hand, he wanted it. He wanted to feel good again. He wanted to be active without becoming light-headed or short of breath. He wanted to be able to put his hand on his chest and feel a heartbeat that was strong and steady and didn’t make him woozy. He wanted to be free of the fear that his heart would suddenly give out, though he suspected he never would.

On the other hand, he was terrified of going under, even more terrified of not coming out of it. His heart, the heart he’d been born with, was keeping him alive, sick as it was. Once they took it out, there was no going back. If the new heart didn’t work, he was dead. If he rejected the heart, he was dead. If anything went wrong – and there were so many things that could – he was dead. Dying naked on a cold operating table with his chest split open seemed much worse than dying in his own, warm bed, with Becci holding his hand. He didn’t want to go that way.

But he swallowed the fear, forced the unpleasant thoughts and images out of his mind, and managed to return a thin smile as he told the nurse, “Let’s do it.”

Less than three hours later, Brian found himself lying on a gurney in the pre-op room, holding Becci’s hand. In his other hand was an IV, delivering a combination of antibiotics, anti-rejection drugs, and a mild sedative. His chest and groin had been shaved, consent forms had been signed, and in a matter of minutes, he would be whisked into an OR suite to be put under. When he awoke – *if* he awoke – a new heart would be beating in his chest.

“You were right, hon,” he said, looking up at his wife with a faint smile. “You said it was gonna happen today, and you were right.”

“I’m always right. Haven’t you figured that out by now?” Becci winked, smiling back, but he could see the corners of her mouth quivering and knew she was on the verge of tears. He had a feeling she was going to break down as soon as he was wheeled into the OR, if not before. He hoped she would hold it together, because if she lost it, he likely would, too.

After such a long wait, during which he had always imagined he would feel excitement and relief when he finally got the call for a new heart, the morning’s events felt like a

blur. Everything had happened so fast: the pager going off, the call to Becci, the ride to the hospital, the last-minute blood tests, and finally, the news that the heart would be his. He hadn't expected it. He'd always known he was a back-up, an alternate, an understudy, the third-string candidate. The chances of the heart bypassing the other candidates – those who were sicker and higher on the list – before him were slim. But somehow, he had beaten out the lead players and proven to be the best match for the donor heart. The next thing he knew, he was being prepped for surgery.

There had hardly been time to think, to mentally prepare, for what he was about to undergo. It was a race against time now: the heart was being flown in by helicopter from another hospital, and it was only viable outside the body for a matter of hours. The transplant team had to be ready and waiting when it arrived, in order to transplant it into Brian's body within the accepted margin of time. That meant there was no delaying, no reconsidering. This was it.

"I know, I know," Brian murmured, running his thumb over Becci's knuckles. "You're always right. How could I forget?"

"We'll blame the sedative," replied Becci, squeezing his hand. "Is it helping you relax at all?"

"I guess. I feel kinda foggy... but at least I'm not freakin' out. Wouldn't wanna tax the ol' ticker too much before they take it out of me. Gotta take it easy..."

With her free hand, Becci reached up and smoothed his hair away from his forehead. "You're gonna be fine," she said, as she did this. She had always liked to run her fingers through his curls. It felt good, soothing, perhaps because it reminded him of how his mother had comforted him when he was sick as a child.

"Will you call my mom and update her on what's going on?" he asked suddenly. He knew his mother was aware of what was happening, because Becci had called on her way home from work to ask her to keep Calhan longer.

"Of course," Becci smiled, nodding. "I told you, I called her while you were getting prepped, to let her know it was a go. She said to give you her love and that she was already praying, remember?"

"Oh yeah..." The sedative really had put him in a fog, he realized.

"I'll call her again once you're in surgery. Maybe she'll want to bring Calhan up for awhile."

A picture of Brian's son swam hazily in his mind, and for the first time, tears sprung to his eyes. He swallowed hard and tried to collect his thoughts, wanting to make himself clear. "If something goes wrong, tell her and Dad that I love them. And tell Cal..."

“I know,” Becci said quickly. Her eyes were now bright with tears, too, and her voice sounded thick as she continued, “And I’ll make sure he knows, too. But Brian... don’t worry about it, alright? You’re gonna be fine. If there’s anyone who can get through this, it’s you. You’re strong...”

“I know,” Brian echoed her. “Just in case...”

“Just in case,” she agreed, squeezing his hand again. Then she looked away, and he could tell she was trying to collect herself, trying to hold the tears at bay. He swallowed again and blinked his own back, trying to reassure himself that this conversation was unnecessary, that he’d see her again in a matter of hours, in a world of pain but with a healthy new heart beating life into his body. He didn’t want to consider the alternative, that this could be the last time he saw his wife, and that he would never see his son, nor the rest of his family, again.

The curtain that sectioned off his corner of the pre-op room suddenly rattled open, and Brian recognized his transplant nurse, Rose. “The heart is en route, and Dr. Robert is scrubbing in,” she announced, with a cheerful air of anticipation. “You ready to get this show on the road?”

There it was again, that word *ready*. Brian felt he would never be completely ready to let go of Becci’s hand and have his heart cut out. But, knowing he had no choice – or, at least, no rational choice but this – he nodded.

Becci walked alongside his gurney as Rose wheeled it out of the room he was in and into the hallway. Another nurse was waiting to help transport him into the OR. “This is where you say ‘see ya soon,’” said Rose to Becci, putting a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll have you wait in the family room down the hall, to your right. I’ll try to come update you at least once during the operation, but don’t worry if you go a few hours without hearing from anyone. The surgery usually takes four to six hours, but it can take longer, and that doesn’t always mean something’s wrong.”

Becci nodded, before bending down to Brian. She gave him an awkward hug, which he returned one-armed, and whispered, “I love you,” her warm breath caressing his ear.

“Love you too,” he murmured back. “See ya in a few hours.”

“See you soon,” she echoed as she straightened up again. He could see that her eyes were full of tears again, and her chin was quivering with the effort not to let them fall. She had been his constant companion and caretaker for the duration of the long wait, and it all came down to this moment. Struck by his love for her, he flashed her a wide grin, which she returned, tearfully.

It was that last image of her that he held in his mind as the two nurses wheeled him away. In the operating room, when the anesthesiologist placed an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose and instructed him to breathe deeply and count back from ten, Brian

closed his eyes against the brightness of the lights overhead and pictured his wife's bright smile instead, as he counted himself into darkness.

6. AJ (II)

In the emergency room of Cincinnati's Bethesda North Hospital, heads turned as a man, dressed all in black, barreled through the doors, carrying the limp body of a woman wrapped in a blood-soaked blanket.

The triage nurse looked up at the commotion and let out an "Oh!" of alarm as she jumped up and hurried around her desk to grab a gurney. "Here, lay her on this," she said quickly, patting the clean, white sheet covering the gurney.

"She's in labor," AJ panted, lowering Jori onto the gurney. It scared him, the way her head and limbs flopped down limply without the support of his arms, as if she were a mere rag doll. "We were doing a home water birth, but something went wrong," he explained, without looking at the nurse. He could not take his eyes off Jori. Her complexion had always been fair, but he'd never seen her face so white, almost gray. Her eyes were closed, her features slackened and blank. He almost would have preferred her screaming in pain, just to know she was still alive. Anything was better than this pale, still Jori. "Please, you have to help her," he begged the nurse needlessly.

"She's in good hands," the nurse assured him.

Before the gurney was whisked away, he reached into the bundle of blanket and found Jori's hand. It felt like a dead fish, cold and gray, floppy and wet, her fingers still pruned from the pool. He squeezed it tightly, as if the warmth and strength from his own hand could seep into hers, and he held on, jogging alongside the gurney, as a group of people in lab coats and scrubs steered it through the halls and into another room.

"Do we have a history on this woman?" a new voice, a male voice, asked brusquely.

AJ glanced up at the doctor who had spoken, but before he could say anything, another voice from behind answered, "Jori Wilder, thirty-nine weeks, uncontrolled bleeding during a water birth at home." He turned and saw with relief that the midwife, Barb, had joined them. He was glad to let her do the talking, while he tuned out the exchange of medical gibberish that followed.

"Scuse me, hon; we need to move her," said a different nurse, and AJ found himself being shunted away, his grip torn from Jori's hand. He stood back and watched with a surreal sense of shock, as the medical personnel swarmed in around Jori. With expert coordination, they picked up the edges of the blanket and used it like a sling to swiftly slide her over to a new gurney in the center of the room. One nurse moved the old gurney out of the room, and the rest surrounded the new one.

AJ watched anxiously over their shoulders as their gloved hands swept over Jori's body, hooking her up to all kinds of different equipment. One attached leads to her chest, while another threaded an IV into her arm. An oxygen mask was placed over her face, while another device was clipped to her finger, and a second monitor was strapped to her bulging belly. The nurse who had pushed the gurney out returned with a cart carrying what AJ recognized as an ultrasound machine, and in no time, the familiar *whoosh whoosh* of the sonogram joined the cacophony of other sounds: the frantic beeping of the heart monitor, the faint hiss of the oxygen tank, and frightening phrases that jumped out to AJ's ears.

"... BP's dangerously low..."

"... a placental abruption..."

"... going to crash..."

"... emergency C-section..."

AJ's head jerked towards the doctor who was running the ultrasound. "C-section?" he repeated in alarm. "No, no, Jori wouldn't want that. She wanted a natural birth."

The doctor looked up, his eyes meeting AJ's. "I'm sorry, but there's no chance of a vaginal delivery. The placenta has detached from the uterus, and your baby is in distress. It will die if we don't get it out immediately, and your wife could bleed to death. We need your consent for emergency surgery."

Among his racing thoughts were, *She's not my wife. I can't make this decision for her.* Nonetheless, a nurse pushed a clipboard into AJ's hands and started rattling off all the risks of surgery. AJ barely heard her, though he took in a few words. *Bleeding. Infection. Death.* But when she handed him a pen and pointed to a line at the bottom of the form, he scribbled some version of his signature. What choice did he have? Jori wouldn't have wanted this, but she would be grateful if it saved her life and their daughter's. She would understand. He'd done what he'd had to.

"Do we have consent? Good," said the doctor in the same brusque manner, hardly waiting for the nurse to show him the signed consent form. "We need to get her to the main OR; she's not stable enough to transfer to OB. Call up to OB and tell them we need an attending down here to perform an emergency C-section, pronto."

As the doctor barked out orders, AJ moved in closer to Jori, and when no one told him to back off, he reached for her hand again. With his free hand, he rubbed her shoulder... touched her face... brushed back her hair. He wished she would wake up, but maybe it was better that she didn't know what was going on. By the time she regained consciousness, it would all be over. She wouldn't have to endure the panic and fear he was feeling, and once she had Lucy in her arms, it wouldn't matter how she'd arrived.

“Hang in there, Jor,” he whispered, stroking the back of her hand. “We’re gonna get you and Lucy through this.”

“Sir?” He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see the nurse who had gone over the consent form standing beside him. “I’m sorry, but they need to move Jori to the operating room now. One of our OBs is on her way down to perform the Cesarean. I’ll show you where you can wait.”

AJ stared. “Wait? You mean, I can’t go with her?”

“Not to the OR. I’m sorry.” The nurse apologized while gripping his upper arm, already trying to steer him out of the room. “I’ll update you and let you know as soon as your baby is born. If you’ll just follow me...”

“Wait... just give me a sec,” AJ insisted, twisting out of her hold at the foot of the bed. He reached out and caught one of Jori’s swollen ankles. “Love you, baby,” he whispered, tenderly massaging her foot. He traced over the black outline of a dove he had tattooed on her ankle the day they’d met. He remembered how she’d gritted her teeth through the ache of the needle pricks and insisted that he keep talking, to distract her.

“Stay strong,” he said now, squeezing her foot. He was surprised when it didn’t jerk out of his grasp; she was usually so ticklish. A lump rose in his throat. “I’ll be with you when you wake up,” he forced himself to continue. “Me and Lucy.” It wasn’t a promise he was sure he could keep, but if she could still hear him, he hoped it would encourage her. Jori didn’t do well with needles and hospitals. It was the whole reason she had insisted on a home birth. This was exactly what she hadn’t wanted.

Full of doubts and regret, he finally allowed the nurse to pry him away from Jori and lead him to a separate waiting area. “My name’s Valerie,” she told him. “I’m going to check on Jori, and I’ll be back to talk to you when I know more.” She left him with a clipboard full of forms to fill out, for the hospital’s admitting and billing departments. AJ looked down at the paperwork and sighed. He was glad he’d gotten Jori insurance after she’d found out she was pregnant. He couldn’t fathom what all of this would cost. Yet another reason Jori hadn’t wanted to bother with the hospital.

He set to work filling out the forms. He had a hard time holding onto the pen; his fingers felt clumsy and numb. He stopped after every few questions, his mind wandering, worrying. Had they started yet? How long would it take? What if something went wrong? What if he lost Jori, or Lucy, or both of them?

He stopped writing. The pen fell from his hand and bounced once on the carpeted floor before rolling under his seat. He didn’t bother to bend down and retrieve it. The words on the paper blurred before his eyes, as they filled with tears. He sniffed once, struggling to keep it together. *Don’t go there*, he warned himself. *Don’t even think it*. He couldn’t imagine losing Jori, or the baby, or God forbid...

They were his family. His life. He'd never been happier than these last few months, being with Jori, running the shop together, preparing for the birth of their child. Living the dream. This couldn't be the end of it. He wasn't ready to wake up screaming.

Half an hour later, the paperwork complete, AJ paced the waiting room, his cell phone in his hand. He had intended to call Jori's parents and fill them in on what was happening, but instead, he'd dialed the number of his own mother in Florida. He couldn't bring himself to get Jori's mother and father all worked up before he could reassure them that she was okay. His mom, meanwhile, had kept him from getting too worked up himself.

"Jori's a tough girl. I know she'll be fine. She's in good hands – the doctors' and God's. You have to put your faith in them, Alex. They'll get her and Lucy through."

His mother was the only person allowed to call him by his given name, and she was the only one able to comfort him, too. When he ended the call, he felt reassured, but even so, his pacing feet stopped dead, and so did his racing heart, when the nurse, Valerie, appeared in the doorway.

"How's Jori?" He pelted the question at her, but she didn't seem taken aback. She was probably used to this sort of thing. She offered a patient, professional smile.

"They're still working on her, trying to close her up."

"Trying?" AJ challenged.

"There was some bleeding. It's common with a placental abruption," Valerie explained calmly. "In the meantime... would you like to see your daughter?"

AJ drew in a breath. "Lucy? She's out? She's alright?"

Valerie nodded, her smile growing. "She's beautiful. You're naming her Lucy? Is that short for anything? Lucille?"

AJ shook his head. "Just Lucy. Lucy Sky Diamond McLean. That's what Jori's wanted to name her, ever since we found out she was a girl."

He didn't miss the way Valerie's eyes widened slightly, but she recovered quickly and replied, "I like it. She'll be unique."

He nodded. "Just like my Jori."

"Well... come with me, and I'll take you to meet Lucy," said Valerie. She took him upstairs to the second floor, where the maternity ward was located. Following her into the ward, AJ was struck by how different it looked and felt from the Emergency Room.

The floors on this level were inlaid with flooring designed to look like hardwood, rather than industrial tile. The walls were papered in soothing, pastel patterns, and the furniture looked soft and comfortable. Even the lighting was subdued, compared to the bright fluorescents a floor below. Everything about the décor suggested the ward had been designed to feel warm and homey, rather than cold and sterile. AJ wished Jori had been able to deliver on this floor, rather than in an operating room downstairs.

He was confused, at first, when Valerie took him past the big windows of the nursery, through which he could see rows of babies in clear, plastic cribs. “Isn’t Lucy in there?” he asked.

“We have her in the NICU, for the time being. She’s doing well now, but the neonatology team had to resuscitate her after delivery, so they want to keep a close eye on her for at least a day, to make sure there are no complications. She seems healthy, though,” added Valerie quickly, when she saw the wave of panic flood AJ’s face. She put her hand on his arm, as they reached the NICU entrance. “Are you ready to go in and see her, Dad?”

Dad. For a moment, AJ blinked in surprise, caught off-guard by hearing that title used in place of his name. Before Jori’s pregnancy, he had never imagined himself as someone’s “Dad.” Now, he realized, he was. In a couple of years, once she was old enough to talk, he would hear that word coming from Lucy’s mouth. It was weird to think about, but it made him swell with pride.

He nodded, and Valerie held the door open and ushered him in. “Over here,” she said in a hushed voice, leading him through a maze of plastic incubators. Though it didn’t seem possible, most of the babies in this room were even tinier than the ones in the nursery. Their skin wasn’t smooth and pink, but red and wrinkly, almost raw-looking. They were more sad than cute. He looked at them with pity as he walked past, and his heart began to thump with apprehension as he wondered if Lucy would be the same way.

“Here she is,” cooed Valerie, stepping out of the way.

Walking past her, AJ’s breath caught in his throat as he approached the open, plastic crib and gazed down at the baby inside. She was beautiful. She looked exactly as she should – pink and perfect, with plump, rosy cheeks and ten tiny fingers and toes.

“You can touch her, if you want,” said Valerie. “You won’t bother the equipment.”

There were sticky pads attached to her bare chest and thin tubes coming out of her tiny nostrils. AJ was careful not to bump them as he reached in and brushed two fingers against her cheek. Her skin was warm and soft. He prodded one of her clenched fists with his index finger and smiled when he felt her tiny fingers close around it. “Hello, little girl,” he whispered, his voice hoarser than usual. “Hi, Lucy. It’s me... your daddy. You gave your mama and me a scare, but I’m glad you’re here now, safe and sound. I know your mom can’t wait to meet you...”

He was so mesmerized by the miracle that was Lucy, he didn't even notice when Valerie pushed a rocking chair up behind him, nor did he was aware of actually sitting down in it. But he would always remember the moment when Valerie scooped Lucy up from her crib, wrapped her in a white baby blanket, and placed her in his arms for the first time. He was cautious at first, afraid of holding her too tightly, but Valerie helped him get her positioned, and he cradled her close to his chest. He was still sitting there, rocking her, when Jori's doctor came in.

"Mr. McLean?"

AJ looked up, startled by the woman in a white coat who had called him by name.

"I'm Dr. Jones, the obstetrician," she introduced herself, and he felt himself go limp with relief when she smiled. "I wanted to let you know that Jori's out of surgery and resting comfortably. There was some bleeding, and we had to give her a transfusion, but she's going to be fine."

AJ released his breath in a huge sigh. "Thank you, Doctor," he replied gratefully. "I'd shake your hand, but mine are a little full right now..." He grinned down at Lucy, asleep in his arms.

Dr. Jones smiled, too. "She's a beautiful baby. You and Jori are lucky parents."

AJ nodded. "I know. Can I see Jori?"

"Of course. She's just coming out of anesthesia, and she'll be in some pain, but I'm sure she'll be glad to see you and hear about the baby. Valerie can show you the way."

It was hard to let Lucy go, but worth it to see for himself that Jori was alright. He followed Valerie out of the NICU and down the hall, to a different part of the floor. Jori lay in bed in a small room of her own. Her eyes were closed, her red hair spread over the white pillowcase. The ends were still damp, but the rest of her was dry, her wet bikini replaced with a thin hospital gown. Wires and tubes snaked out from under it, reminding him of how close he'd come to losing her. A lump rose in his throat as he gently lifted her hand from the covers and gave it a squeeze. It was warm and dry this time, and to his relief, he felt her fingers curl around his in a weak squeeze back.

"Jori?" he whispered, as her blue eyes fluttered open. "You with me, babe?"

She gazed up at him in confusion. "Did I have the baby?" she murmured, her voice soft and slurred.

He smiled down at her. "Yes you did. Lucy's here, and she's amazing. I can't wait for you to see her."

Her brow furrowed. "What happened?" she breathed. "Did I have a C-section?"

“You sure you wanna hear all the gory details now?”

“Just tell me...”

He sank down on the edge of the mattress. “Yeah, baby, you did.”

She closed her eyes, as her whole face crumpled, and when she opened them again, they were full of tears. “It hurts...” she whimpered, as one of them slid down her pale cheek.

AJ reached up and brushed it away with his finger. “I know. But you’ll be alright. You’ll get through it. Lucy’s counting on you.”

She nodded, managing a wavery smile. “Lucy... Lucy in the sky...” Her eyelids drooped shut. “... with diamonds,” she murmured, and the lines of pain in her face smoothed out, as she drifted back to sleep.

AJ remained in his perch on the bed, still holding her hand.

7. Brian (III)

In the midst of the darkness, there was light.

At first, it was just a pinprick in the distance, like the glimmer of sunlight at the end of a tunnel. But it grew nearer, the round halo of light expanding outward, filling his vision. It was bright, almost blinding. It fought the darkness, chasing it away, and at first, he was grateful. But the light kept coming, so close it threatened to swallow him up. He couldn’t see anything, and as the light surrounded him, his feeling of comfort turned to fear.

He was going to die.

The thought crossed his mind a split second before he felt a crushing blow, and the light faded to impenetrable dark.

In the operating room, Dr. Robert pulled the defibrillator paddles away from the new heart in Brian’s chest and smiled, as he watched its weak, random twitches strengthen into vigorous, pulsing beats.

Brian awoke one sense at a time.

Before he could open his eyes, he became aware of the sounds that surrounded him. A loud hiss, like static on a TV. A medley of beeps, of all different frequencies and

durations. One blipped steadily in the background, like a repeating measure of quarter notes, all the same pitch. *My new heartbeat*, was his first conscious thought. He heard voices around his bedside, hushed and unintelligible. He was only able to pick out his name, but the two syllables were enough for him to recognize the voice that had spoken them. *Becci*, he thought next.

He wanted to see her, but his eyelids felt like lead weights. His whole body felt too heavy to move, yet it seemed like he was floating, perhaps drifting beneath the surface of deep water, the darkness and pressure pushing in on him from all sides. His chest felt tight, like someone had dropped an anvil onto it. His throat felt clogged, like he was trying to breathe through a straw and not getting enough air. There was something in the way; he could feel it now in his mouth. He tried to reach up to pull it out, but found he could not raise his arms. He could feel his fingers, opening and closing, but could not seem to get his hands to cooperate. Then he felt another set of fingers lace through his own, and the softest touch on the back of his hand. He knew that touch. *Becci*, he thought again.

Suddenly, he could smell her perfume, instead of latex and antiseptic. The scent was comforting and familiar, like the first few notes of his favorite song. *Becci*.

He fought again to open his eyes, and finally, his heavy eyelids began to cooperate. They fluttered once, and he saw a sliver of light. Twice, and he began to make out blurry shapes. On the third try, he looked up and saw her face above his. It was framed by a wispy blue cap that held her dark hair and half-hidden behind a mask that covered her mouth and nose, but it was hers, alright. Her beautiful, blue eyes sparkled down at him, like the sky on a cloudless day. *Becci*. Her name was like heaven, but he knew then that he was alive.

“Rise and shine, sweetie,” said Becci, and even though he could not see her lips, Brian knew she was smiling. Her eyes crinkled at the corners, and her voice was filled with the same expression of joy and relief. “They said you came through surgery with flying colors. Your new heart’s doing great.”

He had so many questions, but found he couldn’t speak. The thing in his mouth was a breathing tube, he realized, now that he was more alert. He remembered the nurse who had prepped him for surgery explaining about it. She’d told him there would be lots of tubes and wires at first; his hands were tied down so he didn’t accidentally pull them out.

“How are you feeling? Are you in any pain?” Becci asked, her voice sympathetic.

As the fog of anesthesia wore off, Brian was aware of pressure and discomfort, but not actual pain like he’d expected. Not yet, anyway. He closed his eyes and opened them again slowly, hoping to communicate that he was alright, just tired and groggy. He wanted to go back to sleep, but he wasn’t ready to trade the light of his life in for darkness again. Not yet.

“Your nurse said they’ll be able to pull the breathing tube in another hour or so, when you’re more awake. Then you’ll be able to talk,” Becci went on, feeding him little bits of information at a time.

His lungs felt constricted by the machine that was doing their job for him, and he longed for the tube to be gone. But more than that, he longed to sleep. As his eyelids began to droop again, Becci squeezed his hand. “I know you’re tired,” she said. “You just rest.” Then she leaned over and tenderly kissed his forehead. “I love you.”

He squeezed her hand back, then rotated his wrist from side to side, wiggling his hand around until she realized what he wanted. She unstrapped the soft restraint that bound his wrist to the bed rail, and finally, he was able to raise his arm. It still felt heavy, but he managed to lift it enough to point at himself. Then he bent his middle and ring fingers, pointing his pinkie, thumb, and index finger straight up – the sign for “love.” Finally, he pointed at Becci and held up two fingers. *I love you, too.*

Her eyes creased at the corners again, as she beamed through her mask. He wished he could slip it off and see all of her face. He wished he could stare at it and never look away. But the darkness was creeping in on him again, little by little, and he knew he couldn’t fight it forever.

Eventually, his leaden eyelids sank, bringing the darkness once more, and Brian slept.

He dreamed of being outside. Dead leaves crunched beneath his feet as he ran through the darkness. He was breathing hard, yet he wasn’t out of breath; he could feel his heart vigorously pumping blood and oxygen and adrenaline through his veins as he ran, a breeze whipping through his hair and the fallen leaves.

When he woke for the second time, Brian was disappointed to find that he was still tethered to an ICU bed. He felt more alert now, alert and alive. This time he knew it, not only by the beep of the heart monitor, but by the pain. Though he’d never been in a car accident before, he imagined this was what it would feel like to be run over by a truck – literally, flattened. He tried to lift his head from his pillow, straining to look down at his chest. Instead of tire tracks, he saw a large, white, gauze bandage, faintly stained pink in the middle.

“Welcome back,” said a voice. He turned his head toward the sound and saw a nurse standing beside his bed, making notes on a clipboard. Her eyes crinkled above her mask as she smiled down at him. “I’m just checking your vitals – everything looks great! You ready for that tube to come out of your throat?” Brian nodded as emphatically as he could without pulling anything out himself, and the nurse laughed. “I’ll get a doc. Hold tight.”

She disappeared and returned in a few minutes with a woman dressed in an identical sterile gown, cap, mask, and gloves. The latter introduced herself as a resident, Dr. Beam, and told Brian, “Happy birthday!”

He looked at her in confusion, since his birthday wasn’t until February. It was November.

Dr. Beam’s eyes were smiling. “From now on, you’ll celebrate two birthdays – the day you were born, and the day you were reborn with your new heart. Welcome to your new life. To celebrate, I’m gonna have you blow out your birthday candles – invisible ones, that is. I want you to take a deep breath, and on the count of three, you’re going to blow, while I pull the tube. Got it?”

Brian nodded, wincing as they helped him sit up for the first time.

“This is going to be uncomfortable, and you’ll cough a lot at first, but you’ll feel better breathing on your own without that tube in the way. And you’ll be able to talk,” said Dr. Beam, as she pulled off the tape that held the tube in place. “Ready?” Brian nodded, letting his lungs fill with air, even though it hurt. “One... two... three.”

His chest seared with pain as he blew; it felt like the tube was being pulled all the way from his naval, but finally, it was out, and he was coughing uncontrollably. The nurse put an oxygen mask over his face, and the coughing fit began to subside. Finally, Brian collapsed back against the bed, weak and in pain, his chest aching from the force of the coughs.

Dr. Beam asked, “How are you feeling?” The nurse lifted the oxygen mask so he could speak clearly.

“Hurts,” Brian rasped, sounding like he had laryngitis. The nurse offered him a cup of ice chips, and he took one to suck on and soothe his sore throat.

The doctor nodded, unconcerned. “It’s not going to feel comfortable for you to cough or even breathe deeply over the next few days, but we need you to do both. It’s important that you keep your lungs clear, to avoid infection. Infection is your worst enemy while you’re on immunosuppressants to keep your body from rejecting your new heart.”

Brian nodded his understanding. Dr. Robert had prepared him for this; he knew that in order for the transplant to take, his immune system had to be virtually wiped out, which left him vulnerable to germs. It was the reason everyone who came to visit him over the next few days would need to wear masks and gloves and sterile coverings over their clothes, the way the doctor, the nurse, and even Becci had.

Wondering about Becci, Brian asked, “My wife?”

The nurse smiled. “I think she went to call your family again. I’ll see if I can find her.”

She left with Dr. Beam and returned with Becci, who slipped her gloved hand into his and squeezed it when she came to stand at his bedside. “I talked to your mom and dad. They’re keeping Calhan busy and send their love. Once you’re in a regular room, I’ll see if they can bring him up to visit.”

Brian smiled, picturing his son. He couldn’t wait to hold him again, to be able to chase him around the house without feeling like he was going to pass out. He put his hand lightly on his chest, over the bandage, imagining the healthy, new heart that beat inside it.

“Wanna listen to it?” asked the nurse, who stood back out of the way, watching.

Brian looked up. The nurse came over, removing her stethoscope from around her neck. She wiped it down with a disinfectant and slipped it gently into Brian’s ears. “Here... take a listen,” she said, handing him the bell.

Brian pressed the end of the stethoscope flat against the bandage and closed his eyes. It nearly took his breath away, at first, to hear the strong, steady beat in his ears, so different from the weak sputtering of his failing heart. He couldn’t stop listening. After a minute, he opened his eyes and looked up at the heart monitor by his bed, watching the perfect peaks sync up with the sounds of his new heart.

Then he looked at Becci, who was watching him intently. “You wanna?” he asked, pulling the stethoscope out of his ears and offering it to her. She nodded, sliding it into her own ears, while he held the bell steady against his chest. He saw her eyes widen and heard her sharp intake of breath as she listened, and for a moment, he was reminded of the day they had sat together in her obstetrician’s office and heard Calhan’s heartbeat for the first time.

New life. That was what the miraculous sound of a heartbeat represented, both then and now. Dr. Beam had been right when she called it a rebirth. This was the first day of the rest of Brian’s life.

“It sounds perfect,” said Becci, taking the stethoscope out of her ears and handing it back to the nurse. When she looked back, Brian was startled to see a sheen of tears in her eyes.

He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. “We got lucky,” he said. But he knew it was more than luck. He owed his life not just to God, or to the team of doctors who had successfully operated on him, but to the anonymous donor, his equal in size and blood type, who had died that morning and whose heart now beat in his chest. He cleared his raw throat, wondering about him or her. “Did they tell you anything about the donor?” he asked Becci quietly.

She blinked, and a tear spilled out and slid down her cheek, disappearing into her mask. “She was a woman, in her twenties, from Ohio, who was killed in a car accident,” she said, her voice wavering a bit. “That’s all they could tell me.”

Brian nodded solemnly. He would likely never know the name of his donor, but he liked to think that she would know him, wherever she was now. He pressed his palm to his chest once more, trying to feel the pulse of the heart beneath the bandage. Then he brought his hand to his lips and blew a kiss toward the ceiling.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

8. Jori (II)

Over the past three days she had spent in the hospital, Jori had seen other new mothers wheeled by her open door with their arms and laps heaped with flowers, balloons, and gift bags, while their happy husbands walked alongside them, carrying their newborns in infant seats.

When it was time for her to leave, there were no gifts or decorations to pack up, for no one but Howie had come to visit. All of her family and friends were in Indiana, almost a three hours’ drive away, and she’d told them to wait to make the trip when she and Lucy were home. Now, alone in her room with Lucy while AJ went down to pull the car up and get the carseat out, Jori felt sorry for herself.

“Looks like it’s just us, baby girl,” she whispered, leaning over to plant a soft kiss on Lucy’s forehead. The movement pulled at her incision, and she winced as she settled back in her wheelchair, trying to get comfortable again. She hadn’t expected to be in so much pain, three days after giving birth, but then, she hadn’t expected to give birth via C-section either. The complications she’d suffered had made everything else complicated, too. She couldn’t even hold her baby without the support of pillows placed strategically to protect her incision, and even then, it hurt. Breastfeeding had been a nightmare so far, but Jori was determined to keep trying, hoping it would get easier with time. She knew it was best for her baby, and that was what mattered. Everything she had endured over the past few days – the pain, the fear, the whole near-death experience – had been for this little girl.

Lucy. Looking down at the sleeping infant nestled in the crook of her arm, it was hard for Jori to imagine that this was the life she’d helped to create, the little person she’d carried for nine months. She had felt Lucy move inside her belly, but the baby she now held in her arms was as still as stone. Even at three days old, it was easy to see her resemblance to AJ – the high forehead, the heavy-lidded eyes, the fine layer of dark hair on her head. But though she’d spent hours staring at Lucy, her eyes taking in every last detail of her daughter’s face, Jori had yet to see herself in the infant’s features. “I must have passed on all the dominant genes,” AJ had gloated, when Jori had said something about it the night before. He had said it jokingly, but to Jori, it was no joke. In her eyes, there was no baby more beautiful than Lucy, but if AJ hadn’t placed her on Jori’s chest and told her she was theirs, Jori worried she might not have recognized her own child.

She'd been unconscious when Lucy was born; she hadn't been able to see her slide out into the doctor's hands or hear her first cry. She hadn't gotten to hold her right away, when she was still red and wrinkled and wet. Those precious moments she had missed haunted Jori.

But now was not the time to dwell on them. AJ was back, lugging the car seat. "Ready to go?" he asked excitedly, setting the seat down on the bed.

Jori nodded. She was eager to get Lucy home, though a part of her was nervous. Here in the hospital, she'd had help available whenever she needed it – help with feedings, help changing diapers, even help getting up to use the bathroom herself. Once she went home, she would be on her own. AJ would be around, of course, but although he had boundless energy and the best of intentions, he didn't know any more about babies than Jori did. *What if we turn out to be terrible parents?* she wondered, watching anxiously as AJ took Lucy from her arms and strapped her into her car seat. His hands moved clumsily, awkward at first, but in the end, Lucy was snug and secure in her seat, and they were on the way.

Again, Jori felt a strange sense of disconnect, as she was wheeled out of the hospital by a nurse, while AJ carried Lucy. He put the baby into the back seat of his car, connecting the car seat to its base, while the nurse helped Jori in on the other side. She tucked a towel between the seatbelt and her stomach as she waited for AJ to finish fumbling with the car seat.

"How ya doin'?" he asked at one point, reaching across the seat to squeeze her thigh.

Jori shrugged. "Okay, I guess. I just wanna get home."

AJ nodded. "You bet, babe." He closed the door and trotted around to the driver's side. "We're on our way!" he announced as he slid behind the wheel, jamming his key into the ignition. As the engine sprang to life, Jori worried the rumbling and jostling of the car would disturb Lucy, but the newborn stayed sound asleep and didn't stir the whole way home. AJ drove ten miles slower than he usually did and used all of his signals, taking care to protect the precious cargo in the back seat.

When they pulled into the pothole-filled parking lot behind their building, AJ jumped out to help Jori first, then went around to get Lucy. They made slow progress up the stairs, Jori clinging to the banister as AJ stayed behind her, his free hand touching the small of her back while the other held Lucy's carrier. It was a relief to make it to the second floor landing outside their apartment door; Jori's abdomen burned as if she'd just done a hundred sit-ups, and her legs felt like jelly. When AJ handed her the key, she unlocked the door gratefully and led the way inside.

It was chilly inside the apartment; AJ must have turned the heat down during one of his trips home to pick up clothes. He'd spent the better part of the past three days at the hospital with Jori and the baby, and it was wasteful to squander money heating an

unoccupied apartment. Still, Jori couldn't help but shiver. She turned up the thermostat on the way into Lucy's bedroom.

"Here we are, Baby Lucy," AJ cooed in a soft voice, as he carried their daughter into the artfully decorated nursery. "This is your room. Do you like it? Your mama sure busted her butt to make it look nice."

Jori smiled, her heart swelling with pride and joy as she watched AJ lift Lucy out of her carrier and show her around the room. Finally, the nursery was complete.

They lay Lucy in the crib, under the starry sky with the mirror to reflect her sleeping face. For a long time, the two of them just stood there, arms folded over the crib rail, staring down at the perfect piece of art they had created together, marveling over the miracle that was Lucy Sky Diamond McLean.

"You look beat, babe. Why don't you go lie down?" AJ suggested in a whisper, though he barely glanced over at her. He didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off the baby.

Jori hadn't realized how much she had started to lean on the crib. She wasn't ready to leave Lucy, but as she straightened up, her incision screaming in protest, she knew she wouldn't be able to stand there much longer. "Maybe I'll go take a shower," she said. "I need to wash the hospital stench off me."

AJ laughed. "Alright. You need any help?"

Jori flashed him a tired smile. "Tempting as that sounds, you better stay here with Lucy. I'll be fine." She pried her hands off the crib rail and forced herself to turn away, hobbling off to the bathroom.

After three days of sponge baths in the hospital, Jori really was craving a shower. She shed her clothes, carefully avoiding looking at her reflection in the mirror. She knew how terrible she must look, her red hair hanging limp and greasy, her body bloated with leftover baby weight, her belly bandaged with a large, white dressing that covered her incision. She peeled off the dressing carefully, grimacing at the sight of the angry red slash running down the center of her swollen belly. It was going to leave an ugly scar. Even after she lost the baby weight, she would never feel comfortable wearing a bikini again.

The jagged red line blurred before her eyes as they filled with tears. Jori hadn't prepared for this, had never even consented to having surgery. She knew that AJ had made the decision while she was bleeding to death and that it had saved both her life and Lucy's. She didn't blame him for that. But she did resent the obstetrician who had performed the emergency C-section. Most Cesarean scars ran horizontally below the bikini line, but in her haste to get the baby out safely, the doctor had sliced Jori open from her naval all the way down to her pubic bone. The long, vertical incision would heal and fade with time, but Jori knew she'd never be able to hide it completely. The

realization made her feel violated. She hadn't just been cut open; she'd been gutted like a fish.

By the time she stepped into the shower, the tears had started to fall, blending with the hot water as they dripped from her face. She had a good, long cry as she showered, scouring her skin and scrubbing her face until it was as red and raw as the edges of her incision. The effect erased all traces of tears from her cheeks, and when she got out of the shower and wiped the fog from the mirror, it was impossible to tell she'd been crying. She wrapped herself in a towel, hugging it to her swollen breasts, and carefully combed out her long hair. When she left the bathroom, the apartment was silent; Lucy was still asleep.

"I'm gonna take a nap, babe!" she called softly to AJ. "Wake me up if the baby cries."

"I'm on it, Jor, don't worry about it. Get some rest," AJ's voice drifted back to her.

Jori knew Lucy would need to nurse again before long, something AJ couldn't help with, but maybe she had an hour for a quick nap. She threw on an oversized t-shirt and crawled painfully into bed, her belly throbbing as she tried to find a comfortable position. But no sooner had she closed her eyes than she heard the baby start to cry. Jori sighed as she struggled to drag herself back out of bed. *Welcome to motherhood*, she thought.

9. Brian (IV)

In his dreams, a baby cried. The shrill sound roused him from the fog of sleep, and he struggled to sit up. It felt like there were invisible chains hooked to his ribcage, and if he pulled too hard, he would rip himself in half, right down the middle. Still, Calhan was crying, and he had to get to his son. He rolled slowly out of bed, swaying a little as he tried to stand. Nausea and vertigo made his head spin, but the sound of Calhan's cries quickly cleared it.

"I'm coming, Cal!" he cried hoarsely, stumbling across the room. In his dreamscape, the darkened bedroom looked nothing like the one he shared with Becci, yet somehow, he knew exactly where to go. He followed the frantic cries down the hallway and into a beautifully-painted nursery, illuminated by a carousel lamp that cast colorful patterns on the walls and ceilings as its scenes spun slowly by.

The crib was in the corner. He staggered toward it, his hand pressed against a spot just below his breastbone, where the end of an angry red seam threatened to split open and spill his insides onto the floor. His heart hammered against his ribs as he reached out and clutched the crib rail, holding onto it until the second wave of dizziness had passed. But when he leaned over the rail and looked down into the crib, his heart sputtered and nearly stopped, and he swayed unsteadily again.

The crib was empty.

Brian awoke, gasping for breath. Panic-stricken, he tried to sit up, but the crushing pain in his chest prevented any sudden movements. His eyes darted around the room, and he felt some relief as he recognized his surroundings, different from those in what he now understood to be a dream. He was still in the hospital, recovering from heart transplant surgery. Calhan was at home in his crib, sleeping soundly. If he woke up crying in the night, Becci would be there to comfort him.

Alone in his hospital bed, Brian greedily sucked oxygen through the canula in his nostrils. The thin tubes didn't seem capable of delivering it fast enough; his lungs were screaming in protest, pleading for air. He didn't stop to wonder why his new heart wasn't pounding, as it had been in the dream, until it suddenly started to race. Only then did he become aware of the familiar, fluttery feeling in his chest. Frightened, he turned his head until his eyes found the monitor that displayed his vital signs. He watched his heart rate shoot up from a normal one hundred beats a minute to a shocking one hundred fifty.

Just as he was fumbling for his call button, his night nurse, Rita, appeared at his bedside. "How are you feeling, Brian?" she asked, slipping the bell of her stethoscope under his gown to listen to his heart. "Any pain?"

He started to nod, then reconsidered, as he realized the only real pain he felt radiated from the incision that ran down the center of his chest, not from the heart racing inside it. It was different from the squeezing sensation he'd felt whenever his old heart acted up, but the other symptoms that accompanied it – the sweating, the shortness of breath – were the same. He slowly shook his head, then tried to explain what he was feeling: not so much pain as panic.

"You're clammy," Rita observed, wiping his forehead. "Did you just wake up?"

She had turned up the flow of his oxygen, and even though it hurt, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath before exhaling, "Yeah... a few minutes ago..."

"Do you think you might've had a nightmare?"

His eyes flew open. How could she have known that? "Yeah," he breathed, "that was what woke me up."

The nurse nodded knowingly. "Try to relax," she said. "It's just an adrenaline rush that's making your heart race. The monitor's showing sinus tach – fast rate, but normal rhythm. It may take it a little while to calm down, but that's normal, too." When he frowned, unsatisfied with this explanation, she added, "You may not have realized, but in a heart transplant, all the nerves that connect your heart to the central nervous system are cut. The heart has its own electrical system that keeps it beating, but your brain can't send it messages anymore that tell it to speed up or slow down. It has to wait

for hormones in the bloodstream, like adrenaline, to give it that signal, which takes a lot longer. Consider it a delayed reaction to your dream.”

“That’s weird,” whispered Brian. He supposed it made sense, but it was strange to think that, while he had realized right away that what he’d dreamt wasn’t real, his new heart had yet to receive the news. It was still racing away, as if he were trapped in the middle of a living nightmare. Rita said there was no reason to worry, but he couldn’t calm down while his heart was hammering so hard.

“When you start exercising again, you’ll need to incorporate longer warm-ups and cool-downs into your routine, just for this reason,” said Rita. “It takes some getting used to. I’ll check with your doctor about giving you something to help you relax.” She patted his arm and made a few notes on his chart before she walked away.

Brian lay in a heightened state of panic for several more minutes until Rita returned, a syringe in her hand. “This is just a mild sedative,” she said, injecting it into his IV line. It only took a matter of minutes for the drug to work its magic. As his heart started to slow down, Brian drifted back into a dreamless sleep.

“I heard you had a bad night,” was the first thing out of Becci’s mouth when she came to visit the next morning. She gave Brian a look of sympathy and smoothed his hair back off his forehead, as if he were a small child, Calhan’s age again.

He forced himself to smile up at his wife. “It was nothing. Just a nightmare.” He explained to her what the nurse had told him about his heart needing more time to react to being startled.

Deep furrows appeared in Becci’s forehead as she frowned. “Well, what did you dream that got you so worked up, hon?” she wondered. “Something about the surgery?”

“No...” Now it was Brian’s turn to frown. “It was about Calhan.”

“Calhan?” Becci cocked her head, looking concerned. “What about Calhan?”

“I dunno, it was weird. It was like one of those dreams you used to have right after we brought him home from the hospital as a baby – you know, the ones where you could hear him crying, but couldn’t find him?” Brian remembered many a night spent holding Becci as she sobbed on his shoulder, distraught after another one of the disturbing dreams.

“Ohh, I hated those!” Becci shuddered. “So that’s what you dreamed? Calhan was crying, and you couldn’t find him?”

“Yeah...” Even after the sedative, Brian found it wasn’t difficult to remember his nightmare. It still stood out vividly in his mind. “I could hear him crying, so I got out of

bed and went to his room – only it didn't look like his room; you know how things are always different in dreams – and the crib was empty. Then I woke up, and I couldn't breathe.”

“My OB always said those nightmares were caused by anxiety. I bet that's all it was... just anxiety about everything that's happened in the last few days.” Becci sounded confident, but something in her eyes told Brian she was more concerned about him than she wanted to let on.

“Yeah, you're probably right,” he agreed. He wasn't worried. He'd been feeling better every day, and if there was anything wrong with his new heart, it would show up in the bloodwork and chest X-rays he underwent daily. As Rita's prompt appearance the previous night had proven, every function of his body was being closely monitored, and so far, all signs pointed to a successful transplant. He couldn't wait until he was well enough to be released from the ICU. “As soon as I'm in a regular room, I'd love it if you'd bring Cal up,” he told Becci. “I'm dyin' to see him, especially after that dream last night.”

Becci nodded. “You bet,” she said, and he could tell she was smiling behind her mask. “He'll be glad to see you, too. He misses you.”

Brian felt a pang in his new heart that had nothing to do with the surgery. “I miss him, too.”

When the results of his latest round of tests came back clear, Brian was released to a private room. There were fewer restrictions in this part of the heart institute, so Calhan came to visit the very next day. Becci beamed as she brought him in, and as grateful as Brian was to see his son, he was just as glad to see his wife's smile again. For the past three days, she'd had to hide half her face behind a surgical mask to protect him from germs. Now it was his turn to wear one.

“C'mere, Cal!” he cried, his voice muffled by the mask, as he extended his arms toward the toddler. For the first time since his admission, Brian found himself free of most of the tubes that had tied him down. He could sit up, even walk around without worrying he was going to tangle his oxygen line or tear out his chest drains. The IV in his arm and the ECG leads attached to his chest were the only leashes left to contend with, and they couldn't hold him back from hugging his son. But when Becci set Calhan down on the bed, the little boy stared at Brian, screwed up his face, and started to cry.

“Oh no,” Becci groaned and quickly went into consolation mode. “It's okay, Cal, look – it's Daddy!”

But Calhan just clung to her until he could get down from the bed, wanting nothing to do with the stranger sitting in it. His reaction stung, but Brian tried not to let it show. It must have been the mask, he thought. Cal just didn't recognize Brian behind it. To a

one-year-old in an unfamiliar place, he must have looked different with half his face hidden. So he lowered the mask, despite Becci's squawk of protest, and put on his biggest smile. "Look, bud, it's me!"

Sniffing, Calhan warily lifted his face from Becci's leg and turned to look at Brian, who took it as a good sign when he didn't immediately burst back into tears. "See, Calhan?" Becci cooed softly, squatting down to Calhan's level and pointing up at Brian. "Daddy's all better now. Don't you want to give him a hug? He's missed you!"

Teardrops stained his chubby cheeks and sparkled in his long lashes, but at the word "hug," the toddler opened his arms wide. Smiling, Becci scooped him up again and brought him back over to Brian's bedside. She perched on the edge of the mattress, holding him on her lap, and leaned in so Brian could hug them both. "Be gentle," she warned Calhan, who was sandwiched in the middle, but Brian knew nothing could make him feel better than a big family hug. He ignored the tenderness in his chest as he held his son, the nightmare of losing him a mere memory.

Brian spent another week in the hospital, during which Becci brought Calhan by every day. Brian always looked forward to seeing his family, but found that their visits left him exhausted. Calhan was a bundle of boundless energy, with an equally endless need to be entertained. Just watching Becci chase him around the room left Brian feeling tired, and he worried about what it would be like when he came home from the hospital.

He confided in the hospital social worker, Joan, who assured him his fears were perfectly normal. She was one of the many members of his transplant team, whose job it was to oversee every aspect of his recovery, including the transition from hospital to home. "Of course, you'll need to take it easy at first," she said, during one of their sessions. "It's going to take three to six months for you to fully recover, but in that time, you'll slowly build back your strength. Just remember, moderate exercise is good for you and healthy for your heart. Playing with your son won't make you pass out, like it might have before the transplant. Your new heart can handle it."

Brian couldn't wait for the day when he'd be up to running around and roughhousing with Calhan. He'd never been physically able to before. But even though he could feel himself gradually getting stronger, that day still seemed far away. Just walking the halls of the hospital sapped him of the little strength he'd regained. It felt good to be up and moving again, though, so he followed his doctor's orders and completed his daily exercise routine without complaint.

His goal was to be home by Thanksgiving, and he made it with two days to spare. He was released from the hospital on a Tuesday, and that Thursday, he was treated to a homecooked Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings and, more importantly, the people he loved most.

He had a lot to be thankful for, this year more than ever, but as he looked around the table at the smiling faces of his family – his mother and father, his wife and son – Brian realized that something was missing. Somewhere, there was another family with an empty place at their Thanksgiving table, a family who was mourning the loss of their loved one, whose heart beat inside his chest. They had given him a priceless gift, and Brian was grateful. But he also felt guilty, guilty because while he and his family were celebrating, his donor’s family must be grieving.

That thought would have made his old heart skip a beat, but the denervated donor heart was much slower to react. His father was in the middle of saying the blessing when Brian’s heart finally responded to the flood of emotions he’d felt. As he listened to his father thank God for the family whose generous gift had saved his son’s life, Brian could feel his pulse pounding in his throat. He took a deep breath and swallowed hard, trying to relax and willing his new heart to follow.

10. Jori (III)

It was never quiet inside Vintaj, where classic rock was played on a constant rotation. But in the month since Lucy McLean had been born, the record store’s customers had shopped to a different tune: the sound of a colicky baby crying, on a seemingly endless loop.

That morning was much the same, though the muffled cries were accompanied by the clomping footsteps of a frazzled new mother who was frantically searching for her keys. “C’mon, c’mon, keys... where are you?” Jori muttered to herself, raking a hand through her hair as she paced the kitchen floor. Lucy was strapped into her car seat on the table, screaming her head off. “Shh, Lucy, please,” Jori begged. “Mama can’t think.” She closed her eyes, trying to concentrate. Where could she have left her keys? They weren’t on the hook by the door, where she usually kept them. They weren’t in her purse, though maybe she should check again...

Lucy cried louder as Jori turned her bag upside down, shaking its contents out onto the kitchen counter. She rifled through everything – wallet, cell phone, mp3 player, lip gloss, lotion, hand sanitizer, tissues, tampons, painkillers, coupons, and gum. No keys. She wedged her hand into all of the pockets, turning them inside out. Still no keys.

She did the same to the diaper bag, poking through the extra diapers and wipes, bottles and formula, pacifiers and toys, and a change of clothes. The only keys she found were the set of colorful plastic ones Lucy liked. She tried shaking them in front of Lucy’s face now, but they did nothing to calm the baby. Lucy screamed on, and Jori sighed, resigning herself to face reality.

“We’re gonna be so late.”

She should have been on her way to the pediatrician's office, where Lucy was scheduled for her one-month check-up, but the morning had only gone from bad to worse. First Jori had overslept, after being up most of the night with her newborn. When she'd gone in to get Lucy for her morning feeding, she'd found that the baby had blown out her diaper since the last one, which meant not only a diaper change, but an impromptu bath before she could get Lucy dressed for the day. Once the crib sheet was in the washer and the baby was in her carrier – clean, fed, and fully-clothed – Jori had scrambled to get herself ready, only to discover, on her way out the door, that she'd somehow managed to misplace the keys to her truck.

“Maybe Daddy's seen Mama's keys...” Still thinking out loud, Jori hitched the diaper bag up higher onto her shoulder, hooked her purse over her forearm, and hoisted Lucy's carrier off the table with her free hand. “If not, we'll just have to take his car instead.” She struggled out the door, down the stairs, and into the store, in search of AJ. Instead, she found Howie behind the counter.

“Hey, Jor – everything okay?” he asked, when he looked up and saw her.

“Where's AJ?” she demanded. “I've gotta take Lucy to the doctor, and I can't find my fucking keys.”

Howie frowned, his eyes full of concern. “AJ's out for the day. What's wrong with Lucy?”

“What? Nothing's wrong with Lucy; it's just a check-up, but – what do you mean, AJ's out for the day? Out where?”

“He went to see a seller about buying an old jukebox,” said Howie, sounding surprised by her question. “He didn't tell you?”

“No!” spat Jori, although maybe he had. In the back of her mind, she tried to remember what she and AJ had talked about before they'd gone to bed the previous night, but she was drawing a blank. It was possible that he had mentioned going out of town and she hadn't bothered to pay attention.

“I'm pretty sure he took your truck,” Howie added. “I don't think a jukebox would fit in his car.”

“Then he took my keys too! Damn him,” Jori cursed, as she realized how much time she'd wasted searching for something she'd had no chance of finding. She didn't have a spare key for her truck, so of course AJ would have taken hers and left her the keys to his car. With a sigh of exasperation, she set Lucy's carrier down on the counter. “Watch her a sec, will you?”

Before Howie could sputter a response, she sprinted back upstairs, cursing her own stupidity with every step. She let herself into the apartment, and sure enough, AJ's keys were right where he always left them, on his dresser, in an antique ashtray shaped like a

bathtub with a ceramic nude woman sitting inside it. Jori rolled her eyes at it, snatched the keys, and raced back downstairs to relieve Howie. “Thank you,” she panted, lifting the car seat off the counter. “See ya later.” She could feel Howie’s eyes on her back as she rushed out the back door.

She knew what he must have been thinking, and he had every right to think it: she was a total idiot. Jori had thought the so-called “pregnancy brain” would go away once she had the baby, but although she wasn’t pregnant anymore, she felt just as scattered. She blamed it on a lack of sleep; she hadn’t gotten a full night’s rest since Lucy was born. Every few hours, the baby woke, crying, for a feeding, and every few hours, it was Jori who had to drag herself out of bed. She tried to make up for it by napping while Lucy slept during the day, but it didn’t seem to help much. For the past few weeks, she’d felt like she was walking through a fog.

Jori stepped out into the sunlight and blinked, temporarily blinded by the brightness. When her eyes adjusted, she saw AJ’s car sitting in its usual spot in the parking lot, next to the empty space her truck usually occupied. She was rather attached to the truck, an ancient Ford she’d inherited from her grandfather and detailed herself with spray paint, but even she had to admit, AJ’s car was more practical for running errands with a newborn.

She slid her bags across the back seat before she put Lucy in. The baby was still crying, and Jori’s hands shook as they fumbled with the base of her car seat. “Shhh...” she repeated again and again. “Shhh...” She’d read that this sort of “white noise” soothed colicky babies, but with Lucy, nothing seemed to work. Even a ride in the car, which was supposed to be calming, had no effect. Lucy screamed the whole way to the doctor’s office. The other mothers in the waiting room looked at Jori when she walked in, judging her with their eyes. None of their kids were crying.

Jori swung her hair over her shoulder and held her head high as she crossed the room to check in at the front desk, but inside, she felt ashamed and embarrassed. She managed to hold herself together until she was in the privacy of an exam room, and then she broke down. “I just don’t know how to get her to stop crying,” she sobbed to the pediatrician, burying her face in her hands and rubbing her tired eyes. “No matter what I try, she just cries and cries. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong!”

She felt a light hand on her shoulder and looked up to see a sympathetic smile on the doctor’s face. Dr. Nancy Magill had been a pediatrician for twenty-some years, and Jori supposed she had seen and heard it all. “You’re not doing anything wrong,” she assured her. “Having a colicky baby can be stressful, and many new mothers feel overwhelmed. Have you tried any of these techniques?” She went over some tips, everything from burping the baby more frequently during feedings to eliminating certain foods from Jori’s own diet. “Some mothers have found that cutting back on caffeine helps,” she suggested.

Jori sighed and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. She wasn’t a coffee drinker, but she depended on Mountain Dew to keep her functioning after a long night with little sleep.

“I’ll try to cut back,” she promised, reminding herself that if it got Lucy to stop crying, she wouldn’t need the caffeine anyway.

Dr. Magill nodded encouragingly. There was still the ghost of a smile on her face, but behind it was a more serious expression. “Whatever you do, don’t forget to take care of yourself, too,” she told Jori, offering her a tissue. “Is there someone who can take the baby while you take a break?”

Jori shrugged. She took another swipe at her eyes with the tissue, then crumpled it in her fist. “My boyfriend, AJ, takes care of her in the evening, once his store is closed.”

“And what about during the day?”

With a snuffle of self-pity, Jori shook her head. She had no real friends in Lockland; for the two years she’d lived there, her whole world had revolved around AJ. Now she regretted not making more of an effort to make connections in the community.

Dr. Magill was still studying her with a look of concern. “You know, it’s not a sign of weakness to ask for help...”

“Like what, a nanny?” Jori let out a humorless laugh and looked down at her lap, picking at the soggy tissue. “Like we could afford one.”

“That’s not necessarily what I meant,” said Dr. Magill gently. “Sometimes it helps just to have someone to talk to during the day, especially when you start feeling down.”

Something about her tone of voice cause Jori’s head to shoot up. She eyed the doctor suspiciously. “You mean like a shrink?”

Dr. Magill didn’t bat an eyelash. “Do you think it would be helpful to talk to someone like that?”

Jori held her gaze. “Do you think I need to talk to someone like that?”

“I think you might find it beneficial. A lot of mothers experience the same kind of emotions you’re feeling, Ms. Wilder. It may just be the stress and fatigue getting to you, it may be hormones, or it may be the ‘baby blues,’ but true postpartum depression is not uncommon among mothers of colicky babies, and it’s not something to take lightly, either. If you’d like, I can refer you to a therapist who specializes in women’s health issues.”

Jori frowned as she considered the offer, remembering her resentment of the psychiatrist who had diagnosed her bipolar disorder and drugged her with antidepressants and mood-stabilizers until she couldn’t tell how she felt anymore. She didn’t want to fall back into that spiral. But out of love for Lucy, she accepted the referral, tucking the small slip of paper into her pocket with the promise that she would look into it if she didn’t start feeling better soon.

Things will get better, Jori told herself as she drove home from the pediatrician's office that day. It was quiet in the car, an oldies station playing softly in the background as Lucy snoozed in the back seat. She had fussed through her check-up, but finally crashed at the end. At least she wasn't crying anymore. Despite the colic, she'd been given a clean bill of health, and although Jori was relieved, the thought lingered in the back of her mind: *But if there's nothing wrong with her... then maybe there's something wrong with me.*

The road blurred before her eyes as they filled with fresh tears. She reached for the sunglasses she kept in the glove box, only to realize she was in AJ's car. She fumbled through the compartment, anyway, but found only a pack of cigarettes. The mere sight of them was enough to make her start craving the nicotine again. She'd stopped smoking when she'd found out she was pregnant, and AJ only smoked in the car, never around Lucy. Jori shoved the pack back into the glove compartment and slammed it shut.

Sniffing, she returned her eyes to the road, just in time to see a massive pothole looming ahead. There was no time to swerve around it. She struck it with a sickening *thunk* that sent the whole car bouncing on its shocks. The bump was big enough to jostle Lucy, who woke, startled, and began to cry. "No..." Jori moaned, gripping the steering wheel. "No, no, no..." She eased the car to the shoulder of the road and put it in park, switching on her hazard lights. Worried about a flat, she jumped out to check the front tire and was relieved to find that it still looked full, with no obvious signs of damage. But when she climbed back into the car, Lucy was still crying.

"Shh..." Jori whispered, turning around in her seat so that Lucy could see her face. She tried smiling, though she felt like bursting into tears and crying right along with Lucy. "It's okay, baby girl," she said. "We're okay. We're okay."

It was the mantra she kept chanting to herself as she put the car in gear and pulled back onto the road. But later, after she'd finished breastfeeding and lain Lucy down for a nap, Jori found the doctor's referral in her pocket as she was changing her clothes. The piece of paper fluttered to the floor, and she stooped to pick it up, sinking down on the edge of the bed to read the name and number of the therapist Dr. Magill had recommended. She hesitated, stewing over it for a few minutes, before she finally reached for her cell phone and dialed.

11. Becci (II)

To celebrate one month post-transplant, Becci cooked Brian his favorite meal: homemade macaroni and cheese. She used his mother's recipe, which called for Ritz cracker crumbs on top. As she was taking it out of the oven, Brian wandered into the kitchen and sniffed the air. "Somethin' smells amazing," he said, coming up behind her.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and looked over her shoulder at the dish she'd set on the stove. "And it looks even better. What'd I do to deserve a woman like you, huh?"

He always knew just how to flatter her. Turning, Becci smiled and pecked his cheek. "Enjoy it while you can, sweetheart. It's not a meal I'll be making often from now on."

Brian sighed. "I know, I know. I'm gonna go get Cal washed up for supper."

"Okay." She watched his back as he walked away. From that angle, it was impossible to tell there had ever been anything wrong with him; he was getting around amazingly well for a man who'd had his chest split open and his heart replaced a mere four weeks ago. But when he returned, hand in hand with Calhan, she could see the tip of his scar peeking over the top of his shirt collar and the puffiness in his face from the steroids he took daily to keep his body from rejecting the new heart.

While some of his medications upset his stomach, others made him almost insatiably hungry, but due to the risks associated with weight gain, he was on a restricted diet – low fat, low sodium. Baked noodles smothered in melted cheese and topped with crackers hardly qualified as either, but Becci was so proud of the progress Brian had made over the past few weeks, she'd wanted to satisfy his craving. She placed the pan of macaroni on a hot pad in the center of the table and announced, "Okay, guys, dinner's ready!"

Brian rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Hungry for some mac and cheese, buddy?" he asked Cal.

The toddler reached out his arms, wanting to be picked up, but when Brian started to bend down, Becci quickly intervened. "Ah, ah, ah! No lifting!" she scolded Brian gently, swooping in to scoop up Calhan and set him in his high chair.

"You're right... my bad," said Brian, flashing her a sheepish grin as he sank into his seat. It would be at least two more weeks before his breastbone finished fusing back together, and until then, he was not allowed to lift anything heavier than ten pounds or drive a car. It would be Becci behind the wheel when they went out that night.

Aside from his daily walks around the block and bi-weekly visits to the heart institute, Brian had barely left the house in the two weeks he'd been home. Because of his weakened immune system, he wasn't supposed to be out among crowds of people, but Becci knew how much it meant to him to see his choir perform their Christmas concert.

"Dig in," she urged Brian, after they'd finished saying grace. "I told your mom to be here by six so we can get there early and get good seats."

"Oh, we don't need to be there that early," said Brian. "I already called the school and asked the new guy, Carter, to reserve us a couple of seats in the balcony – front row center." He smiled, sounding pleased with himself. "He said he'd be happy to."

“Oh – well, okay! That was good thinking.”

Brian winked and shoveled a forkful of macaroni into his mouth. Becci turned her attention to Calhan, who had already abandoned his baby fork in favor of using his fingers to push his macaroni around on his plate. She picked up his fork, used it to spear a few noodles, and held it out to him. “Bite?” Calhan obediently opened his mouth, and she slipped the fork in. “Now you try,” she encouraged, loading the fork again and handing it to him.

As Calhan clumsily fed himself, Brian got up from the table. “Did I forget something, hon?” Becci asked, watching him walk over to the refrigerator, open the door, and stand there staring into it. “What are you looking for?”

“Found it.” He grabbed a green bottle off the bottom shelf of the door and brought it back to the table.

Becci blinked. “Lemon juice??”

Brian didn’t answer at first. Bewildered, Becci watched him open the bottle of lemon juice and splash it over his plate of macaroni and cheese. When he looked up and saw her staring, he just grinned, shrugged, and said, “Sorry, babe. It just needed a little extra kick of something.”

It didn’t occur to Becci to be offended. She waited while Brian swirled his fork through his pasta, letting the lemon juice soak in, and then watched as he lifted another morsel to his lips. She expected him to make a face and spit it right back out, so she was surprised when he swallowed and smiled with satisfaction.

“Better?” asked Becci in disbelief.

Still smiling, Brian nodded.

Becci was stunned. “What on earth gave you the idea to put lemon juice on your macaroni?” she wondered aloud, not bothering to hide the tone of revulsion in her voice.

Brian’s smile faded as he shook his head and shrugged again. “I have no idea.”

Brian’s mother Jackie came over to babysit Calhan that evening, so Brian and Becci could go to the high school Christmas concert. In ten years of teaching at West Jessamine, Brian hadn’t missed a single one, though it would be the first he wasn’t conducting himself. Becci could tell he was nervous by the way he kept tugging on his tie. But he’d left his choir in good hands, even serving on the interview committee that had met in August to select his temporary replacement. The new director was a recent college graduate who had gone back to school to get his teaching degree after a failed

singing career. Brian had spoken highly of him, and when he brought her back to the choir room to meet him, Becci could see why.

“Becci, this is Nick Carter, the choir director.” She noticed that Brian left the words “new” and “temporary” out of his introduction, and she was filled with love for her husband, so humble, so considerate of others’ feelings. “Nick, my wife Becci.”

Becci smiled at the tall, blonde man who reached out to shake her hand. “Nice to meet you,” she said, and smiling back, he echoed the same. He was young, still in his twenties, and handsome in his crisp, black suit. Becci pictured the high school girls swooning over his boyish good looks – the blonde hair, the blue eyes, the crooked smile. But when the members of the choir started to trickle in, they ran straight to Brian, swarming around him like bees to honey.

She stood back and watched as Brian offered careful hugs and high-fives to his students, even loosening his tie and undoing his top two buttons to show them the tip of his scar when one of the boys asked to see it. He answered their questions and assured them that he was feeling better every day and couldn’t wait to come back the following school year. Becci knew he missed the kids, and she could tell how much they cared about him, but she was glad when the new guy, Nick, clapped his hands together and called out, “Okay, guys, time to get warmed up! Places, please!” The students reluctantly scurried to their spots, allowing Becci and Brian to go and find their seats.

“Do you want to take the elevator?” she asked, noticing the stream of people filing up the stairs that led to the balcony.

Brian shook his head. “No way. I can handle the stairs – good exercise.”

Becci smiled and offered him her arm. “Stairs it is, then.”

The mask he still had to wear in public earned them a few curious glances, and as they started up the stairs, they were stopped by several staff members and parents who wanted to see how Brian was doing. Becci was relieved when they were finally seated, but even then, she found it difficult to settle down and relax. She had spent the past year worrying herself sick over Brian, and now that he finally recovering, she supposed it was time for her to start healing, too. But it was hard to let go of the fear she’d felt for so long.

The two weeks Brian had spent in the hospital after the transplant had almost felt like a vacation for Becci, and not just because she had been granted a leave of absence from work to be there for him. The real break had been an emotional one, a break from the anxiety that had ruled her life for eleven months. It seemed strange that she should worry less about her husband after his heart transplant than she had before, but the first emotion Becci had felt following the surgery was an overwhelming sense of relief. She knew that Brian was in good hands in the hospital and that, if something should happen to his new heart, he would be taken care of.

Outside of the hospital, she didn't have that same assurance. Even though Brian was looking and feeling better than he had all year, she still worried that something was going to go wrong. When they'd walked into the high school that evening, she'd looked to make sure the AED – Automatic External Defibrillator – was still on the wall outside the auditorium, where it had been all year. She had never noticed it before Brian's diagnosis, but ever since, she hadn't been able to walk past it without imagining having to use it on her husband. She had been a nervous wreck as she'd watched him conduct his choir at the spring concert, worried that he would suddenly collapse, clutching his chest, and go into cardiac arrest right there on the stage. He hadn't, of course, but even now that Brian's failing heart had been replaced, Becci found that her own fear could not be cured completely. It would always be there, lying dormant in the dark reaches of her mind, until another scary situation brought it back to light.

She was glad that Brian was sitting next to her that night and not standing down on the director's podium. Maybe she would actually be able to relax enough to enjoy the music this time. The Christmas season was her very favorite time of year, but last Christmas, she and Brian had only gone through the motions for Calhan's sake, still reeling from Brian's bleak prognosis. This Christmas, having already received the greatest gift they could have hoped for, they could simply rejoice.

With that thought in mind, Becci smiled, slipped her hand into Brian's, and settled back in her seat to enjoy the show.

Afterwards, as they walked out to their car, Becci started to ask, "So, what did you think?" But as soon as she set foot outside the school, she gasped, as a blast of icy air took her breath away.

It was a chilly night, and Brian's teeth were chattering too hard to answer her anyway. He just gripped her arm tighter and walked faster, his head bent forward to break the wintery wind. When they were finally inside the car, with the heat cranked on high, he said, "I think that was one hell of a Christmas concert. Nick did a good job."

Becci laughed, caught off-guard by his uncharacteristic use of a curse word, but quickly collected herself enough to nod and reply, "I think so, too. I really enjoyed it." And she had, once she'd been able to relax and really listen to the music. She and Brian both loved Christmas music, and this year, with the transplant behind them, she looked forward to singing songs like "Joy to the World" with genuine joy again, truly celebrating the season and the gift they'd been given.

As she let the car idle in the long line waiting to turn out of the parking lot, Becci turned up the volume on the stereo, which was playing a CD of Christmas songs. It had reached one of Brian's favorite tracks, a contemporary Christian song called "Mary, Did You Know?" so she was surprised when he reached out and switched over to the radio.

“Sorry,” he said, when Becci looked over at him, her eyebrows raised. “I need a break from all this Christmas music.” As she inched the car forward, he flipped through the frequencies, finally stopping on a classic rock station. Becci recognized the song that was playing as The Beatles’ “All You Need is Love,” but when she snuck another peek at Brian and found him bobbing his head in time to its beat, she didn’t know what to make of it. Her husband loved R&B and contemporary Christian music; the only oldies he listened to were by Motown artists like The Temptations. She’d never known him to be a Beatles fan, but here he was, humming along in harmony.

She didn’t say anything, but later that night, as she lay awake in bed, she puzzled over Brian’s odd behavior. It wasn’t just the Beatles, but a number of strange changes she’d noticed in her husband over the last few weeks she’d spent at home with him. She supposed it was only natural that an experience as traumatic as undergoing a heart transplant would change a person somehow, but sometimes Brian seemed so different. She’d been blaming the changes on his medication, knowing that steroids could make a person moody and that certain drugs affected the way food tasted, but she didn’t think they could alter someone’s taste in music, too.

Stop thinking so much, Becci scolded herself, rolling over to face Brian, who was sound asleep beside her. Some things never changed: she was always the one who stayed awake worrying about one thing after another, while he went right to sleep.

She had just started to drift off, when suddenly, she felt the mattress move, as Brian’s body jerked. Her eyes snapped open to see him sitting up in bed, holding his chest with his hand. “Brian?” She sat up, too, instantly alert and alarmed. Her immediate concern was for his heart, and as that thought crossed her mind, her own heart began to race with fear. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head slowly, giving her a vague glance. “Nothin’... just a bad dream.”

“Another one?” Becci frowned, but felt some sense of relief. The nightmares were nothing new; he’d been having them ever since he left the hospital. They upset Brian more than they bothered Becci, who had attributed them to yet another effect of the drugs he took each night before bed. But now, seeing how shaken he seemed, she wondered if they weren’t another sign of something amiss. “What was it about?” she asked.

“I was running... running away from something; I’m not sure what. My heart was pounding so hard, it felt like it was going to beat itself right out of my body.” He continued to rub his chest.

“Is it pounding now?”

“It’s starting to. It’s so weird, to feel your heart racing for no reason, like you’re still scared even though you’re not.”

Becci squirmed beneath the covers. He may not have been scared anymore, but she was. “Check your pulse,” she urged him.

“I’m fine,” he assured her, but he checked it anyway, something his doctor had shown him how to do. Becci watched the clock as he counted beats, and together, they waited anxiously for his heart rate to finish climbing and calm back down to its new “normal.” Once the adrenaline had left both their systems, they lay down again, Brian spooning Becci from behind. “I’m okay,” he murmured. “Go back to sleep.”

The gentle breeze of his breath on the back of her neck comforted Becci, allowing her to drift off into a dreamless sleep, and when she awoke the next morning, her worries were forgotten.

12. AJ (III)

The weather was getting warmer, while the sky was staying light later into the evening. Spring was definitely coming, and AJ couldn’t wait. It had been a hard winter. The store’s first quarter sales figures had been dismal, but he had expected a lull between the holiday shopping season and the start of spring, when people were more likely to stop in as they strolled the sidewalks of downtown Lockland.

What he hadn’t expected was just how demanding his new job as a parent would be. He loved Lucy more than anything, but nothing could have prepared him for the toll her arrival would take on him and Jori... mostly Jori. She was the one who cared for the baby by herself all day, while he was working downstairs in the shop. Even as he prepared for closing, he could hear Lucy’s crying through the ceiling. She cried all the time – colic, the doctor said – and AJ didn’t know how Jori dealt with it day in and day out and still stayed sane.

He did know that she didn’t always deal with it well. She’d seemed depressed lately and had started seeing a therapist, at the suggestion of Lucy’s pediatrician. The counseling sessions seemed to have helped somewhat, but their relationship was still strained. As he listened to the sound of Jori’s footsteps stomping across the ceiling, AJ tried to think of some way he could cheer her up.

He was watching Howie reorganize a display of mood rings by the cash register when the idea came to him. “Hey, Howie!” he said suddenly. His business partner and best friend looked up, eyebrows raised. “What are you doin’ tonight?”

“Nothing...” Howie answered warily. “Why?”

AJ grinned. “How do you feel about babysitting?” He could tell just how Howie felt by the look that flashed across his face, but before he could come up with an excuse, AJ added, “I wanna take Jori out tonight. She’s been in a funk lately, and we haven’t had a

date night since Lucy was born. I'd like to do something special for her. She needs a break, and I need a night with my woman, if you know what I mean." He waggled his eyebrows, and Howie rolled his eyes. "Will you watch Lucy for a few hours? Please?" AJ begged.

Howie caved much more quickly than he'd anticipated. "Fine, alright," he agreed, although he sighed heavily. "What time?"

"Let's make it eight. We'll put Lucy to bed before we leave, so you really won't have to do anything; you can just watch TV while she sleeps."

"What if she wakes up?"

"She won't," AJ assured him, although Lucy never slept more than three hours in a row.

"Well, what if she does, and what if she starts crying?"

"My kid, cry? Never." AJ grinned again. "C'mon, D, this'll be good practice for when you're ready to have a kid of your own."

"I don't even have a wife," said Howie. "I'm nowhere near ready to have a kid."

"Well, when you are, you'll have your experience babysitting mine to fall back on. And don't you think it's about time to pop the question to Leigh? You guys have sure been dating a long time."

Howie shrugged. "We're in no hurry." He went back to the box of mood rings, straightening a stack of little cards that showed what each color meant.

AJ was watching him try on one of the rings when the words suddenly spilled out: "I think I'm gonna propose to Jori tonight."

Howie's head shot up, the ring hanging halfway off his finger. "Seriously?"

AJ nodded. Sure, he'd only just decided to do it, but he had never been more serious. It wasn't really as spontaneous as it seemed; he had been contemplating the idea of marriage for months, ever since Jori had found out she was pregnant. It had never bothered them before, not being married, but now he decided that an engagement ring was just what Jori needed to make her happy again.

All he needed was to find the ring.

"Hey, you mind closing up?" he asked Howie. "I wanna check out that pawn shop on the corner. You think they're still open?"

"Why, need to pick out a diamond?" Howie sounded like he was joking, but AJ just smiled.

“Maybe.”

Howie stared at him with an incredulous expression on his face. “So you’re serious about proposing, but you don’t even have a ring? Be honest, AJ, how long ago did you decide to do this?”

AJ snickered. “About two minutes ago. So I take it that’s a yes? Thanks, man, I owe you big time! Oh, and we’ll see you at eight, alright? Later!”

Before Howie could sputter his response, AJ darted out the front door and headed down the street. The sign on the door of the pawn shop said it was open for another hour, so he went inside. It was empty, except for the man behind the counter. “Hi there,” AJ greeted him. “I’m looking for anything resembling an engagement ring. Got anything good?”

The shop owner showed him a variety of rings, but none of them seemed special enough for Jori. She deserved an engagement ring that was as beautiful and unique as her, and AJ decided he wasn’t going to find that one-of-a-kind ring in a random pawn shop. In the end, he walked back to Vintaj empty-handed, but before he went up to his apartment, he stopped in the store and picked out one of the mood rings, slipping it into his pocket on his way up the stairs.

Jori was asleep on the couch when he came in, Lucy lying awake in her playpen in a corner of the living room. “Hi, baby girl,” AJ cooed softly, scooping her into his arms. At two months old, she was still tiny, but she was starting to hold her head up and follow him with her eyes, which were still the same cerulean blue as her mother’s. Jori complained that her eyes were the only physical trait Lucy had inherited from her. AJ hoped they never changed.

Lucy gurgled in response, and Jori jerked awake. She sat up, squinting blearily at AJ through the strands of hair that hung in her eyes. “Oh, hi... I didn’t hear you come in,” she mumbled, sounding still half-asleep.

“Hey, babe.” AJ grinned, unfazed by her disheveled appearance. He’d grown accustomed to Jori’s “stay at home mom” look: the lank hair, the bare face, the baggy t-shirt and sweatpants she slouched around in all day. But it was time to bring back the woman with whom he’d fallen in love. “Get up, and get dressed. Howie’s coming over to babysit, and I’m taking you out!”

“What?” Jori blinked in surprise, but he saw the way her face brightened.

“You heard me, woman. Now go get ready!” He swatted her playfully on the backside as she scrambled up off the couch. He took her place, cuddling with Lucy until Jori reemerged from the bedroom, completely transformed. She was wearing an emerald green dress with a plunging neckline that accentuated her post-pregnancy cleavage and a forgiving empire waist that hid her post-baby belly. Her hair tumbled over her

shoulders in long, loose waves, and her eyes popped, framed by thick, lined lashes and smoky, shadowed lids. AJ wolf-whistled as he looked her up and down. “Lookin’ good, babe. You sure clean up nice!”

Jori made a face. “I feel fat,” she pouted.

“You don’t look fat,” AJ pointed out. “You look smokin’ hot.”

She rolled her eyes, a smile tugging at the sides of her mouth. “You’re just saying that... but thanks.”

“I only speak the truth.” Grinning, AJ stood up. “Guess I should go make myself look worthy of standing next to you.” He heard Jori laugh as he walked away, wandering into the bedroom to change his clothes.

When he came back out, Jori had just finished feeding Lucy a bottle of breast milk and was ready to put her to bed. “I pumped earlier, so there’s another bottle in the fridge if she wakes up and needs more while Howie’s here,” she told AJ before she carried Lucy back to the nursery.

AJ passed this information on to Howie when he arrived and received a glare in return. “You told me she wouldn’t wake up,” Howie protested. “Now I have to feed her a bottle?”

“Unless you have a tit she can suck on.” AJ snickered, but Howie continued to glower, clearly not amused. “That’s only if she *does* wake up and wants it – which she probably won’t,” AJ added quickly. “But if she does, you’ll be glad I told you where to find it.”

Howie shook his head. “You’re so gonna owe me for this...”

“I know. Thanks, buddy, you’re a real pal! Oh hey, there’s Jori – time to go!” announced AJ, relieved to see Jori tiptoeing out of the nursery.

“She’s asleep,” Jori whispered. “Hi, Howie. Thanks for babysitting tonight.”

“He’s happy to do it,” AJ replied, before Howie could say otherwise. Slipping his arm around Jori, he steered her toward the door, saying, “I already told him everything he needs to know, so I guess we should be going. ‘Bye, Howie!’”

Once they were on the other side of the door, Jori giggled. “He didn’t look too happy to be here.”

“He was. He just has a funny way of showing it.” AJ grinned. “C’mon, let’s get outta here.” He grabbed her hand as they went down the stairs.

It had gotten chilly outside since the sun went down, but there was still a spring in AJ’s step as he walked Jori out to his car, one hand holding hers while the other was

crammed in his pocket, clasped around the ring he intended to give her when the mood was right.

They drove into downtown Cincinnati and dined at a restaurant right on the riverfront. The candles on each tabletop provided a romantic ambience and just enough light to read the menus. Jori ordered a glass of wine, while AJ settled for a Coke, and as they waited for their appetizer to arrive, he looked across the table at her and smiled.

“Feels good to get out for some grown-up time, huh?” he said.

Jori smiled back. “Yeah... but it feels weird, too.” In the flickering candlelight, he watched her lips fall into a frown. “This is the first time we’ve ever left Lucy.”

AJ realized she was right. He was used to being away from Lucy during the day, but in two months, Jori had never been separated from their daughter for more than an hour or so, and during these times, she left her in AJ’s care. This was the first time they’d relied on a babysitter.

“She’s in good hands,” he assured Jori. “I trusted Howie with my first baby – why not this one?”

A wry smile slid across Jori’s lips. “Are you saying the store means as much to you as our daughter does?”

“Not at all, just that they’re both special to me, and I’m confident in Howie’s abilities to handle both.” Smiling easily, he reached out and patted her hand. “Relax, babe. I want you to enjoy this evening.”

Jori nodded and took a sip of her wine. “Wow,” she said, after a few seconds, fanning her face with her free hand, “this stuff’s going straight to my head. My mom always said alcohol gave her hot flashes after she had a baby – I guess it runs in the family.”

AJ chuckled at the sight of her flushed cheeks. “I guess that’s a good thing. We don’t want Lucy nursing on boozy breast milk now, do we?”

Jori yanked her other hand out from under his and shot him a dark look, her eyes threatening. “One glass of wine,” she said. “That’s all I asked for. I haven’t had a drink in almost a year.”

He shrugged. “Me neither.” Not that he didn’t still crave it, but his commitment to Jori and Lucy kept him from caving to temptation.

“You still smoke, though,” Jori pointed out. “If you’re allowed one vice, so am I. End of discussion.”

AJ smiled. “You don’t have to get snippy. I’m not judging you. Drink up!”

But Jori continued to glower at him, apparently convinced he was secretly admonishing her for wanting a glass of wine. AJ looked out the window, where he could see across the Ohio River to Kentucky. Sometimes he felt like he and Jori were standing on opposite shores. She’d seemed so distant lately, her moods as unpredictable as the river itself.

He was relieved when the waitress finally brought over their appetizer; the spinach and artichoke dip made for a nice distraction. By the main course, Jori’s mood had improved, and during dessert, AJ decided the moment was right. When Jori had finished her last bite of cheesecake and laid down her fork, he reached across the table and took her hand.

“What’s this for?” she asked, smiling.

He held back his own smile, trying not to let his face give it away before he got the words out. “Nothing... just thinking how beautiful you look tonight.”

Blushing, she ducked her head a little, so that a tendril of hair fell into her face. “Well, thanks for giving me an excuse to get all dolled up.”

“You don’t have to get dolled up to be beautiful,” said AJ. “The day I met you, when you walked into the tattoo parlor in a tank top and shorts, with no makeup and a hangover... you were beautiful then, too.”

Jori scoffed. “I was also thirty pounds lighter.”

“You’re even more beautiful with curves. And boobs,” he added, eyeing her cleavage.

“Well, good, ‘cause I don’t think I’m ever getting my pre-baby body back, so get used to the curves. Don’t get too attached to the boobs, though; I have a feeling they’ll shrink back down when I’m done breastfeeding.”

AJ chuckled. “I’ll miss the boobs, but if I could spend every day for the rest of my life looking at those curves, I’d die a happy man.” Jori rolled her eyes, but AJ leaned forward and squeezed her hand. His heart was hammering, and he knew his next words would change his life – and hers – forever. “I’m serious,” he said. “I’ve loved you since the day I did your tattoo, and I want us to be just as permanent. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” Jori sat up a little straighter, her eyes widening, and he could see that she was starting to realize what he was about to do. “What I’m saying is... I want to marry you.”

Jori let out a little gasp, as AJ slid out of his seat and sank to the floor in front of her on one knee. His free hand fumbled in his pocket for the mood ring, as his other hand held hers, and when he found it, he whipped it out, held it up, and said, “Jori Jean Wilder... will you make me the happiest man alive and become my wife?”

Jori's free hand was clapped across her mouth, and her eyes were full of tears, but she nodded, soundlessly at first, and then squeaked, "Yes! Hell yes, I will!"

AJ laughed and slipped the mood ring onto her finger. It was too big and immediately twisted to the side when she held up her hand to see it in the light. He explained quickly, "It's just a cheap mood ring from the store. I thought we could pick out your real engagement ring together."

Jori laughed. "I love it!" She looked more closely at the ring. "It's turning blue – that means I'm happy, right?"

He thought back to the little color key cards he'd seen Howie organizing. "I dunno – *are* you happy?"

Beaming, she jumped up from her chair, pulling him to his feet as well, and threw her arms around his neck. Then she pressed her lips to his and kissed him deeply. When they broke the kiss, breathless, she whispered, "Does that answer your question?"

He grinned and nodded. "Here's another question for you: Wanna get out of here?"

Whether it was the wine or simply the happiness that had gone to her head, AJ did not know, but Jori was positively giddy on the ride home. While he smoked a cigarette, she sang along to the radio at the top of her lungs, her hair whipping around wildly in the wind that gusted through the open windows. At one point, her hand snaked across the center console to squeeze his thigh, and he stomped down on the gas pedal, startled. The car shot forward as the engine revved, throwing them both back against their seats. AJ quickly eased off the accelerator and turned to look at Jori, who was wearing a sultry smirk on her face. He raised his eyebrows, and she waggled hers in return.

Forcing himself to look straight ahead, AJ tried to focus on the road, but it was difficult when he could feel her fingers creeping slowly across his leg, toward his inner thigh. "Whatcha doin', Jor?" he asked, a note of warning in his sing-song voice. When she suddenly grabbed him, he gasped and nearly lost control of the car, his hand jerking the steering wheel. The car swerved into the adjacent lane, and an angry honk from somewhere behind him told AJ he'd narrowly missed sideswiping someone.

When he'd steadied the wheel, he flicked his cigarette out the window and whipped his head toward Jori. "What the fuck are you doing, trying to get us killed?!"

She looked wide-eyed and shaken, but she was laughing, like she'd just come off a rollercoaster ride. "Just having a little fun with my fiancée," she replied innocently.

AJ shook his head, taking a deep breath and holding it for a few seconds before he released it. His heart was racing, ricocheting off his ribs. "You know I love you, babe, but let's save the fun for the bedroom, huh?"

“Aww, where’s the fun in that?” Jori giggled, but she kept her hands off of him until they got home.

That night, they made love for the first time since her C-section, and in the morning, when AJ woke and looked over at Jori, still asleep with a corner of her pillow clutched in her hand, he noticed the mood ring on her finger, still glowing a deep shade of indigo. When he went down to open the store for the day, he consulted the cards by the display on the counter.

Jori had it right. In the dark blue box was just what he wanted her to be, what he hoped they’d be together.

Happy.

13. Brian (V)

The baby was crying again. Brian followed the sound down the darkened hallway and into the colorful nursery. He crept toward the crib in the corner, where the mobile twirled a menagerie of animals around in a slow circle, tinkling the notes to a familiar tune. His memory added lyrics to the melody:

“Imagine all the people, living life in peace. You, you may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you join us, and the world will live as one.”

His eyes drifted upward, following a trail of stars to the ceiling, where a round mirror hung like the full moon in the sky, reflecting the red face of the screaming infant in the crib beneath it.

He reached down into the crib and plucked a plush toy out of one corner. It was a stuffed octopus, pastel-colored, with eight legs and a smiling face. He held it out for the baby to see, shaking it a bit to make the legs wave about, but the baby’s cries only escalated.

Sighing, he took a step backward, away from the crib. He could feel the blood rush to his pounding head, as his heart began to race. His fingers tightened around the octopus’s head, slowly squeezing and releasing... squeezing and releasing... squeezing...

“Brian?”

Brian blinked, and suddenly, Becci was standing beside him, her hand on his shoulder. He looked down into the crib, and Calhan wasn’t crying anymore, but sound asleep. The mobile was gone. Calhan hadn’t had a mobile over his crib since he was a small baby. Bewildered, Brian turned to Becci. She was staring back at him, her brow furrowed.

The concerned expression on her face was all too familiar to him; he'd seen that look too many times over the past year not to recognize it.

"Are you awake?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, frowning.

"Are you okay?"

He stood still, assessing his condition. Up until then, he'd felt fine, but at that point, he became aware of a fluttery feeling in his chest, the familiar sensation of his heart beginning to pick up its pace. He raised his hand to the side of his neck and felt his pulse pounding beneath his fingertips. It was fast, but strong and steady. "I think so," he said. "Was I dreaming again?"

"You were sleepwalking," whispered Becci. "I woke up, and you weren't in bed, and I got worried, so I came looking for you. I found you standing in here, just staring down at Calhan with that bear in your hand."

Brian looked down and found that he was holding Calhan's teddy bear. "Oh." He held up the bear in confusion, turning it over a few times in his hand. Then he gently lowered it over the crib rail and laid it next to his sleeping son.

"Come on," Becci said, squeezing his shoulder. "Let's go back to bed. I don't want to wake him."

Brian nodded and followed her out of the room, his heart racing. "I was dreaming," he whispered to Becci in the hallway. "I remember now."

She looked back at him. "The same dream as before?"

He nodded. "The one with the crying baby."

It was one of several recurring dreams he'd been having for three months now, although this was the first time it had caused him to sleepwalk. As far as he knew, he'd never done that before. Usually, he woke up in his own bed, where he'd wait for his heart to start racing and gradually slow again, as the rush of adrenaline worked its way out of his system. He was used to the sensation by now; it had become almost a routine and was no longer scary. Still, the dreams themselves left him feeling unsettled.

Becci seemed equally unnerved. She waited until they'd climbed back into bed to ask, "Has something been bothering you, honey? I mean, sleepwalking's a sign of stress, and these nightmares you've been having... maybe it's an anxiety thing? Are you worried about your appointment tomorrow?"

Brian considered the question. He was scheduled to go to the heart institute in the morning for his three-month check-up, where they would test his heart for signs of

rejection. The procedures weren't pleasant, but they were a necessary evil, and he'd become used to them by now. Besides, he'd been feeling fine – better every day, in fact – and hadn't experienced any symptoms of rejection so far. There was no reason for him to worry. “No,” he answered truthfully, “not really.”

“Well, I want you to mention this to Dr. Robert,” said Becci, giving him a stern look. “The sleepwalking and the nightmares. If they're stress-related, I'm sure he'll have a suggestion for how to stop them, and if they're just another side effect of your meds, maybe he can make an adjustment to them.”

“Aw, Beccs, it's not that big of a deal,” Brian protested, feeling that she was overreacting. She had a tendency to do that, especially where he and Calhan were concerned.

“It is a big deal!” she insisted. “To me, it is, anyway! If you could have seen how you looked when I walked into Cal's room just now, the way you were just standing there with this vacant stare on your face... it was creepy, Brian! It freaked me out. And whatever's causing this, whether it's stress or anxiety or whatever, it can't be good for your heart. So promise me you'll talk to him tomorrow, please?”

She gave him a pleading look that Brian was unable to resist. “Alright,” he agreed, nodding. “I promise, I'll tell him. But I can't promise he'll have any answers for us.”

“Just talk to him,” Becci repeated. “I'll feel better if I know that he knows about this. If he says it's not a big deal, then I won't worry as much.”

“Anything to keep you from worrying. You worry too much already.” He leaned over and planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. “And like you said, all that worryin' ain't good for your heart. We gotta make sure yours lasts as long as this one.” Winking, he pressed his hand to his chest, where he could feel his heart starting to slow down.

Becci returned his wink with a sad smile. “It's not mine I'm worried about.”

“I wish I was going with you,” said Becci wistfully in the morning, as she got ready for work. “It feels wrong not to.”

Brian was sitting at the kitchen table, where he'd laid out his morning dose of medications. Looking up from the line of brightly-colored pills, he said, “Well, we both know you can't afford to miss any more work.”

Becci had gone back to her teaching job the week before, after taking the maximum twelve weeks of medical leave to care for Brian. “It's like coming back from maternity leave all over again,” she'd told Brian after her first day back.

“Except, instead of having a little bundle of joy at home, you're stuck with me,” he'd joked.

“You mean I’m blessed to have my big ol’ baby back home,” she’d corrected, grinning. Then she added, “But seriously, it’s like just it was when I came back from having Calhan – everyone’s always asking about you, and all I can think about is getting home to you again.”

Brian knew she still worried about him while she was at work, but it was different now: he wasn’t dying anymore. He was getting better, and by the time school let out for summer in another three months, he would finally feel normal again - as normal as a heart transplant recipient ever could. He couldn’t wait to get back to the life he’d left behind fourteen months ago, when the diagnosis of heart failure had brought it to a screeching halt. More than that, he couldn’t wait to feel like his old self again.

“Don’t you worry about me, babe,” he reassured Becci, plucking up a few of his pills and popping them into his mouth. He washed them down his throat with a swig of water, swallowing hard, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’ll be fine.”

“What’s with all this ‘babe’ stuff nowadays?” she teased him, crinkling her nose. “Don’t you go getting all cocky on me, Brian Littrell.”

Brian shrugged, not sure what had possessed him to use that particular term of endearment. “How could a guy not get cocky after scoring the most beautiful woman on the planet?” he replied, flashing her a cheeky grin.

Becci threw back her head and laughed so hard, even her hair bounced. “I love you,” she managed to say, breathless from laughing, her eyes bright and her cheeks rosy. In that moment, she had never looked more beautiful. When she bent down to kiss him goodbye, he savored the moment, tasting the flavor of mint toothpaste mixed with vanilla lip gloss as she pressed her mouth against his, inhaling the scent of her perfume as she pulled away.

“I love you too,” he said back, wishing she didn’t have to leave and that he didn’t have to, either. He wasn’t looking forward to what the day had in store for him. Reluctantly, he scooped up a second handful of pills and forced himself to swallow them. When he set his water glass down on the table, Becci was still standing there, watching him with an odd expression on her face. “What?” he asked, wiping his mouth again.

“Just... don’t forget the promise you made to me last night, okay? Make sure you talk to Dr. Robert about the nightmares.”

He nodded. “I will, I promise.”

Her face relaxed, the creases on her forehead ironing out flat. “Thank you. Alright, I guess I should grab Cal and get going. Good luck with everything today. I’ll see you this afternoon?”

“See ya later,” he confirmed, smiling. “Have a great day at school.”

She smiled back tightly. “I will,” she replied, but he knew she would worry about him all day.

He choked down the rest of his pills while she went to collect Calhan. When she came back into the kitchen, carrying the toddler on one hip with the diaper bag slung over her opposite shoulder, she leaned down to let Calhan kiss his father goodbye, and then they were gone, out the door, on their way over to Brian’s parents’ house, where Becci would drop off Calhan before continuing on to school. Alone in the house, Brian finished his breakfast and wandered back to his bedroom to get dressed for the day, knowing his ride would be there soon.

His cousin Kevin arrived promptly at eight o’clock to pick him up, and they left for Lexington right away. “Hope traffic’s not bad,” said Kevin, glancing at the dashboard clock as he pulled away from the curb in front of Brian’s house.

Brian laughed. “Relax, Kev, my appointment’s not for another hour. We’ll be there with plenty of time to spare.”

Usually Becci accompanied him to the heart institute, but now that she was back at work, they’d had to make alternate arrangements. Brian was allowed to drive again, but not after undergoing a heart biopsy, one of his regularly scheduled procedures, for which he would be given a mild sedative. Luckily, the appointment correlated with one of Kevin’s days off, so he had volunteered to drive Brian to and from the hospital.

They made small talk on the way, chewing over the weather, the family, and their plans for Valentine’s Day. Kevin, whose mother was the older sister of Brian’s father, was a commercial airline pilot who flew a regular line between Lexington and Orlando, Florida. He still lived half an hour from Lexington in the town of Harrodsburg, where he’d been born and raised, but he had a crash pad in Orlando and, apparently, a girl there as well. “Yeah, I’m flying on Valentine’s Day, but Kristin and I’ll do something Saturday to celebrate,” he said in his slow drawl, staring straight out the windshield as he drove up Route 68. “You got anything big planned for Becci?”

Brian grinned. “I’m gonna ask for a copy of my chest x-ray so I can turn it into a big card. It’ll say, ‘My old heart belonged to you, and my new one does, too’ – somethin’ like that, anyway.”

Kevin took his eyes off the road long enough to look Brian’s way. “You serious?” he asked, the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Brian shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. It’s creative, though, ain’t it?”

“I’ll give ya that one, cous. It is creative,” Kevin admitted, chuckling.

Brian spent the rest of the car ride thinking about romantic things he could do for Becci. She had done so much for him over the past few months, so many things that *weren’t*

romantic, that the least he could do was show her how much she meant to him. He was still scheming when Kevin pulled into the hospital parking lot.

Brian led the way to the heart institute on the first floor. The front desk where he checked in was decorated with red and pink paper hearts. As he signed his name on the necessary paperwork, he could sense Kevin still standing behind him. “You don’t have to stay here the whole time, you know,” Brian said over his shoulder. “Like I said, it could take a few hours, so if you wanna go drive around or whatever, I can just call you when I’m done.”

Kevin returned his apologetic glance with a patient smile and held up a book. “It’s alright; I came prepared. I got nothin’ else to do today.”

So they sat down in the waiting area together, until Brian was called back for his exam. He left Kevin and followed the nurse to a private room, where she gave him a hospital gown to change into, checked his vital signs, and drew his blood for the necessary labwork. Then she sent in his cardiologist, Dr. Robert, who peppered him with questions as he listened to his heart and looked at the scar left by his healed incision. Was he diligently checking his pulse, blood pressure, temperature, and weight each day to watch for signs of complications? Was he sticking to his diet? Exercising? Had he experienced any shortness of breath or irregular heart rhythms?

“No,” said Brian to the last question, shaking his head. “I’ve been feelin’ great.”

“And your heart’s sounding great,” Dr. Robert replied, smiling, as he slipped the stethoscope out of his ears and draped it around his neck. “We’ll do an echocardiogram and get a chest x-ray and tissue sample for biopsy to check for signs of rejection, but it seems like you’re doing very well. Any other concerns you have, before we get you set up for the echo?”

Remembering his promise to Becci, Brian shifted on the exam table, causing the paper covering to crinkle loudly underneath him. Embarrassed, he said, “Well, there is this one thing... My wife wanted me to mention it.”

“And what’s that?” asked Dr. Robert with a knowing smile.

“I’ve been having these weird dreams lately... ever since the transplant, I guess.” Brian paused, struggling to put his experience into words. “There’s not much to them, nothing really that scary, just vivid images and feelings... I always feel scared in the dreams, and then I wake up and feel like I’ve just had a nightmare. I’m panting and sweating, and then my heart starts to race from the adrenaline rush.” Seeing the concerned look come over Dr. Robert’s face, he forged ahead quickly, “The first time it happened, it really freaked me out, but I’ve gotten used to it by now. It doesn’t happen every night, but often enough that I’ve almost come to expect it. I always check my pulse and everything when I wake up, and it’s always steady and slows back down to normal after awhile, so I don’t think it’s really anything to worry about... but last night, Becci found me

sleepwalking, which I've never done before. She wondered if it could be a side effect of one of my medications or if it's just stress."

Brian stopped talking at that point and looked to Dr. Robert for a reaction. The cardiologist was frowning, his lips pressed tightly together. "Hm..." he said, stroking his chin. "Your wife may be right. Stress and anxiety can certainly cause nightmares or episodes of sleepwalking, but some medications are thought to trigger nightmares as well. If it's something that's really been bothering you, we could try lowering the dosage of your blood pressure medication and see if you notice any changes in your sleep."

Brian shrugged. "It's not really that big of a deal. I mean, like I said, the dreams aren't even that scary."

"If you don't mind my asking, what are they about?"

"There's two recurring ones I keep having. In one, I'm just running... running away from something, I think, but I never know what. The other one is about my son. I can hear him crying, but when I go to his crib to get him, he's not there. Only sometimes he is. He was there in the one I had last night, when I was sleepwalking, only it didn't look like his room." Brian shook his head. "My wife Becci used to have nightmares like that right after Calhan was born, where she dreamed he was crying and she couldn't find him. I think it's probably just anxiety."

"Have you been feeling anxious lately?" Dr. Robert wanted to know.

Brian shrugged again. "I guess I worry about my heart and my health, you know, but no more than anyone would in my situation."

Dr. Robert nodded. "You've been through a traumatic experience. It might help to talk to someone about how you're feeling. I'll have the transplant social worker get in touch with you."

Brian didn't see how talking to the social worker again would help, but he nodded and thanked Dr. Robert anyway. They proceeded with the echocardiogram and chest x-ray, both of which were painless, and then Dr. Robert left Brian to be prepped for his heart biopsy, which was the part he always dreaded most about these check-ups, since it involved the doctor threading a catheter into his heart through a vein in his neck and snipping off bits of heart tissue to be examined under a microscope for signs of rejection.

He was lying flat on the table, wired to a heart monitor and with the sedative already kicking in, when Dr. Robert burst in and said, "So Brian, I was discussing your case with one of my colleagues, and she reminded me that sleepwalking has been linked to arrhythmias. When we're done here, I'd like to send you home with a Holter monitor, so we can keep an eye on your heart activity for a twenty-four hour period and see if there's any changes while you're sleeping."

By then, Brian was starting to wish he'd never mentioned the dreams.

When he rejoined Kevin in the waiting room later, he was wired with a series of electrodes that attached to a small monitor he wore under his shirt. He had worn a Holter monitor once before, in the days leading up to his diagnosis of heart failure, and although it wasn't painful, its presence now was a grim reminder of the fear he'd felt then. For the first time since he'd come home from the hospital, Brian was worried about the results of his tests. What if his new heart wasn't as healthy as he'd thought? He couldn't bear the thought of going through it all over again.

"You okay, cous?" asked Kevin, looking at him in concern. "That looks like it hurt." His eyes were focused on the large bandage taped over the puncture wound in Brian's neck, but that was the least of Brian's worries.

"Yeah... it's nothing," he said vaguely, but a voice in the back of his mind added, *You thought the dreams were nothing, too.*

When he shared Dr. Robert's concerns with her that afternoon, Becci was understandably upset, but she didn't need to be. As it turned out, neither of them needed to have worried. When Brian returned to the heart institute just days later to go over the results of his tests, Dr. Robert had only good news to give.

"Everything looked great, Brian," he said. "No signs of rejection found in the bloodwork or biopsy, and no irregular heart rhythms recorded by the Holter device. Your new heart appears to be functioning just fine."

"Thank God," sighed Becci, squeezing Brian's hand. She had been adamant about accompanying him to this appointment, insisting he schedule it for right after school let out on Friday afternoon. It was a relief to know they'd be able to go home and enjoy the weekend, worry-free.

"In the meantime," Dr. Robert went on, "I'm going to adjust the dosage of your blood pressure medication, but I would also like you to sit down with Joan, the social worker, to discuss these dreams you've been having. If there's not a medical explanation for your sleepwalking, there may be a psychological one she'll be able to help you address. She can hook you up with some support groups for transplant recipients or even work with you one on one, if you're more open to that."

Brian did not want to sit down with the social worker, but of course, Becci piped right up with, "That sounds wonderful, Dr. Robert, thank you!" He knew then that he would have no say in the matter.

Despite his doubts about seeing the social worker, Brian didn't hold it against his wife for long. On Valentine's Day, they put Calhan to bed early and enjoyed a quiet evening to themselves. Becci cooked Brian a delectable dinner, and he gave her his homemade

Valentine, the X-ray of his healthy new heart, outlined in red and adorned with the line he'd come up with in the car with Kevin: *My old heart belonged to you, and my new one does, too.* Beneath it, he'd written, *Some things never change. Love you always, Brian.* She laughed, then cried, then laughed again and told him she was going to frame it. He suggested they burn off the calories from dinner with a good cardio workout in bed. That night, they made love for the first time in six months.

"Wow," whispered Becci, once they'd finished and were lying beside each other in bed, both of them breathing hard, their bodies slick with sweat. "You were something else. I didn't think you'd have that much stamina!"

Propping himself up on one elbow, Brian looked over at her and grinned. "I've been saving it up since last summer, babe. That's a *long* time to go without sex."

"Tell me something I don't know!" she exclaimed without missing a beat, and they both dissolved into giggles.

It felt good to laugh like that, to make his heart race with passion and pleasure, rather than pain or primal fear. As he rolled onto his back, relaxing into the mattress, Brian rested his hand on his bare chest and savored the feel of the strong, steady beats against his palm. His chest felt wonderfully light, like a huge weight had been lifted off it. There was no reason to worry.

But in his dreams, the baby was still screaming, and Brian woke, panic-stricken once again, and waited for his pulse to start pounding.

14. Jori (IV)

The sun was shining, the sky was clear blue, and a warm spring breeze billowed through the open windows of AJ's car as he sped down Interstate 74. Jori sat beside him in the passenger seat, playing with her cell phone, while Lucy drowsed in the back seat.

"Whatcha doing?" AJ asked. Out of the corner of her eye, Jori saw him shift in his seat to look over at her.

"Texting my mom an ETA," she replied. The last road sign they'd passed had read *Crawfordsville 31*, so she typed a text message that said, "*Just got thru Indy, be there in half an hour,*" and sent it.

A few minutes later, she got a reply: *Oh wonderful! We'll be waiting!*

Jori smiled, in spite of herself.

They'd already been on the road almost two and a half hours, heading west toward her hometown in Indiana, where her parents still lived. The trip had been AJ's idea. Since he hadn't asked their permission before proposing to Jori, he seemed to think that bringing baby Lucy for a visit would soften them up before he and Jori announced their engagement. Jori knew her parents would be thrilled to see their granddaughter, but she worried about their reaction to the news that she was marrying AJ. They still saw him as the older man, seven years Jori's senior, who had stolen their teenage daughter away. In their eyes, he was the alcoholic tattoo artist who had stained Jori's skin with permanent ink, the bad influence who had inspired her to drop out of college and chase his dream instead, and the irresponsible loser who had gotten her pregnant when he could barely afford to keep a roof over her head. Her parents were always polite to his face, but behind his back, they whispered that Jori could do better. She knew they didn't approve of AJ, and she doubted they would accept her marriage to him.

They'll just have to deal with it, though, if they want to have a relationship with their granddaughter, she reminded herself with bitter satisfaction. She wasn't above using Lucy as a bartering chip, if it meant bringing her fractured family back together.

AJ broke into her thoughts. "Think we'll need to make another pit stop, or are we good until we get there?" he wanted to know.

Jori glanced back at Lucy, who was still sound asleep in her car seat, her head lolled to one side. "I think we're good to go. I don't wanna wake her up if we can avoid it. I'll just change her diaper at my parents' place."

By some miracle, the baby had managed to sleep through most of the drive. This had been a huge relief to Jori, who was used to Lucy crying in the car. She took it as another sign of life looking up.

When they pulled into her parents' driveway, Larry and Pam Wilder came bustling out to meet them. "Hello!" trilled Jori's mother, as Jori climbed out of the car. She hurried forward to embrace her daughter. "How was your trip?"

"Fine," said Jori, as she was released from the rib-crunching hug. "Lucy slept the whole way."

"Where is my little grandbaby?" cooed Pam, prancing around Jori to press her face against the back window. "Grandma wants to give her a smooch!"

Before Jori could respond, her mother took it upon herself to open the car door and unbuckle Lucy from her seat. "Mom, we usually just-" The words "take the whole seat out" died on her tongue as she watched her mother scoop Lucy up onto her shoulder. Jori knew what was going to happen, but could only look on helplessly as her three-month-old startled awake, screwed up her face, and started to cry.

"Shh..." whispered Pam, patting Lucy's back as she paced the driveway. "Shh, it's alright..."

She didn't seem to be in any rush to pass Lucy off to Jori, so Jori turned her attention to her father. He was shaking AJ's hand, which was more of a greeting than her mother had given him. "What's this?" he asked suddenly, rotating AJ's wrist. "Black nail polish?"

Jori groaned inwardly, wishing AJ had thought to remove the nail polish before they'd left Ohio. Her parents were traditional, and she knew her father would never understand why a man would want to paint his fingernails. "Hey, they don't call it a *man-icure* for nothing, Dad!" she piped up, sparing AJ the task of trying to explain.

Larry looked up and grinned as he set eyes on his daughter. "Hi, sweetheart!" He dropped AJ's hand and opened his arms wide, pulling her in for a big bear hug. "It's so good to see you."

"You too," said Jori – a half-truth. It *was* good to see them, but the good feeling was being swallowed by a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as she imagined the moment when her parents found out she was marrying AJ. She held her left hand out of sight, hiding the engagement ring she hadn't taken off in the two weeks since she'd picked it up from the jeweler's. She knew her mother's sharp eyes would spot it soon enough, but she wanted to wait until they'd at least made it into the house.

"Need help bringing your bags in?" her father offered, so Jori popped open the trunk for him. While he and AJ hauled their luggage into the house, she got the diaper bag out of the back seat and caught up with her mother, who was still doing laps around the driveway with Lucy screaming on her shoulder.

"Ready to be relieved?" she asked, extending her arms, but the ever proud Pam shook her head.

"Not just yet. I'll walk her in. She'll probably calm right down as soon as she's out of the sun."

Jori turned toward the house before her mother could see her roll her eyes.

Even when she was crying, Lucy seemed to charm her grandparents so much that neither of them noticed their daughter's engagement ring until dinner.

After Lucy had been fed and put to bed, the four adults sat down around the dining room table, which was crowded with home-cooked dishes. All of Jori's favorites were there: fettuccini alfredo, garlic bread, green salad, and peas. She filled her plate, adding a splash of lemon juice to her pasta before reaching for the bottle of ranch dressing. She squirted a liberal puddle, in which to dip her bread, on the side of her plate, then proceeded to drown her salad in the dressing as well.

“You want a little lettuce with your ranch, Jor?” AJ teased, as she set the bottle back in the middle of the table.

She returned his smirk with a sweet smile and said, “I notice you don’t have any peas on your plate, dear. Would you like me to pass them to you?”

“No thanks,” said AJ cordially, shaking his head. Jori knew he hated peas, her favorite vegetable.

“Aw, c’mon, babe, give peas a chance!” Her parents chuckled at what had become a running joke between Jori and AJ.

It was as she was reaching across the table for the dish of peas that Jori heard her mother suddenly gasp. She looked up, startled, and saw her mother staring at her left hand, which was curved around the side of the bowl. “What is that?” asked Pam, pointing to her ring.

Jori smiled and glanced at AJ, who was wearing a goofy grin that seemed to be suppressing his urge to vomit. She cleared her throat. “It’s an engagement ring. AJ asked me to marry him, and I said yes.”

Pam covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes shifting toward her husband. Jori’s father coughed, cleared his throat, and finally croaked, “Well, congratulations!”

The words sounded forced, and his smile seemed false, but Jori smiled back, as if he were being sincere, and said, “Thank you. We’ve been so excited to share the news with you! So what do you think, Mom?”

She looked at her mother, who still seemed stunned. “Well, I... I’m a little... surprised... but... I’m happy for you, honey.” Once she’d said it, she seemed to relax a little, as if the effort had exhausted her, and she reached for Jori’s hand. “Let me see your ring!”

Jori stretched her hand across the table to show her the white gold band, set with an oval-shaped, white stone. Pam squinted at it and asked, “Is that an opal?”

“Uh-huh.” Jori could see the judgment in her eyes as she scrutinized the ring, probably assuming AJ hadn’t been able to afford a diamond. “I didn’t want a diamond; I wanted something different,” she added quickly, before her mother could make a comment that might hurt AJ’s feelings. “An opal is more unique, more me.”

Pam tilted Jori’s hand this way and that, causing the iridescent opal to gleam with a rainbow of colors as it caught the light. Finally, she said, “It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.” Jori smiled. “I have to show you the best part!” For the first time since AJ had slid the ring onto her finger in the jeweler’s shop, she slipped it off and turned it to show her mother the inscription engraved on the inside. In flowery script, it said, *All you need is love.*

“Beautiful,” repeated Pam and passed the ring to Jori’s father, who echoed her sentiments.

Once she put the ring back on her finger, Jori was finally able to relax, feeling that her parents had reacted better than she’d anticipated. Her father wanted to know when they planned to marry, and when Jori told him they hadn’t decided on a date, her mother chimed in with her thoughts. “You should expect to wait at least a year; you know, planning a wedding takes time. Next spring would be lovely...”

“I don’t think I want a spring wedding,” said Jori. “What if it rains?”

“Well, that won’t matter. That’s what bridesmaids are there for – to hold your umbrella and your train while you run from the church to the car!” Her mother laughed.

Jori felt the tension returning as she realized how many details on which she and her mother were going to disagree. “I don’t to get married in a church,” she said. “Neither AJ or I are religious. We’re more... spiritual. We want an outdoor wedding. Right, babe?” She looked to AJ, who swallowed and cleared his throat before nodding.

“That’s right.”

Pam frowned, but before she could protest, Jori forged ahead, “We were thinking fall would be nice. This fall.”

“What? But... this fall... that’s only a few months away!” sputtered Pam. “That’s not nearly enough time to plan a whole wedding! You need to reserve a venue, find a dress, order a cake, hire a caterer, book a DJ, choose the music, create the centerpieces, send the invitations...”

She was on such a roll, it seemed she’d have been able to ramble on forever, if Jori hadn’t stopped her. “Mom. Please. We don’t care about all that. We don’t want a big, fancy, traditional wedding; we want to do something small and simple and ‘us.’ A marriage isn’t about the wedding; it’s about what happens afterwards, and we want to get on with that part. We’ve been together four years. We have a child together. We’re committed to each other. Why wait another year to make it official?”

Pam shook her head, and for the first time since they’d sat down to dinner, Jori saw disappointment in her mother’s eyes. She should have known it was inevitable. With a sigh, she stood up from the table and shoved in her chair. “I’m sorry if that upsets you, Mother, but it’s *my* wedding, *my* marriage, and *my* life, so that’s how it’s going to be. Take it or leave it.”

Tossing her hair over her shoulder, Jori stalked off to the spare bedroom and slammed the door shut. A second later, she heard Lucy start to cry again. Heaving another sigh of frustration, she flopped facedown on the bed and buried her head in the pillows to block out the sound.

The pillows muffled the sound of a knock on the bedroom door, but Jori heard it nonetheless. She sat up, sweeping the hair out of her eyes, and uttered a single word: “What?”

She had expected it to be her fiancée waiting on the other side of the door and was disappointed to hear her mother’s voice ask, “May I come in?”

Jori sighed and said nothing. Pam, mistaking her silence for approval, came in anyway, just as Jori had known she would. She sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for Jori, who stubbornly scooted away.

“Sweetie, please, talk to me,” pleaded Pam. “Don’t shut me out.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” retorted Jori without looking at her. “Why shouldn’t I, when every time I let you in, you try to take over my life?”

“What do you mean by that?”

Jori spoke to the wall. “I mean, whenever I do something that disappoints you, you let me know it. Whenever I make a decision that takes me down a different path than the one you planned for me, you try to set me straight. It’s like you can never just sit back and shut up; you always have to be in the driver’s seat, even when it’s *my life* you’re trying to steer.”

There was a long pause. When Pam finally spoke again, Jori could hear the pain in her voice and hated herself for putting it there. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” she said quietly. “I wish you could see that all I want is for you to have the best life possible. When you were a little girl, you had so much potential. You were bright... creative... funny. You wanted to be an artist or a veterinarian, and you would have been great at either one. I always hoped you’d choose veterinary school, of course – much better job security. But as long as you got an education, as long as you had a degree to fall back on, as long as you did something that made you happy, I would be happy.”

“I don’t need a degree to make me happy,” muttered Jori, still staring at a spot on the wall where someone had left a smudge.

“Then what do you need? Because I don’t think you’re happy now.”

Finally, Jori twisted to look at her through narrowed eyes. “Why would you say that?”

With a raise of her brows, Pam returned Jori’s scowl with a shrewd look. “Because I’m your mother, and I know you better than anyone. I know you’re not happy; you haven’t been happy in a long time. You just hide it better now.”

“I *am* happy,” Jori insisted. “Marrying the man I love will only make me happier. I know you think AJ’s not good enough for me, but the truth is, the life he’s given me is very good. A hell of a lot better than my life was here! He’s running a successful store... helping me raise our beautiful baby...” But the further she stretched the truth, the more her voice started to shake.

“Yes, he is good with Lucy,” noted Pam. “He’s the one who went to comfort her when we heard her crying – in case you were wondering.” *In case you cared enough to wonder*, her tone seemed to suggest.

It stung Jori, who had been struggling with her feelings toward her daughter for three months. She had thought it was a secret struggle, shared only with her new therapist, who assured her that postpartum depression was common among mothers of colicky babies, especially mothers with a history of mental illness. The realization that there might be signs of that struggle showing on the outside rattled her. She tipped her head to the side as she stared at her mother, wondering, *How did you know?*

Pam smiled grimly. “Like I said, I still know you better than anyone. I’ve seen how you are around the baby. You just seem... disconnected, somehow. Disengaged. You say that you’re happy, Jori, but I think that’s just how the cycle goes. One day you’re manic; the next, you’re depressed again.”

“I’ve been seeing someone,” Jori said, before her mother could suggest it. “A therapist who specializes in postpartum depression. Talking to her has helped. It’s getting better.”

“Really?” Pam’s face relaxed into an expression of relief. “Good. That’s wonderful, sweetheart; I’m so glad to hear it. Are you back on medication?”

Jori shook her head. “I don’t want to go back on meds. They didn’t help before; if anything, they just made me more depressed.”

“They stabilized your mood. They kept you from being so impulsive.”

Jori frowned. “Is that what you think I’m being now, impulsive?”

“Well, fall *is* a little soon for this wedding. I do wish you’d wait. But before you go getting all upset with me again, just remember that I love you, Jori no matter what, and I’ll be there to watch you walk down the aisle whenever, wherever. Alright?” She reached out and took Jori’s chin between her thumb and forefinger, tilting Jori’s face up to meet hers. “I love you.”

Jori swallowed the lump that had risen her throat and nodded. “I love you, too.”

When they emerged from the guest room, Jori and her mother found their two men seated on the living room floor, where they'd spread out a large blanket. Lucy was lying on her tummy, surrounded with toys. She had stopped crying.

"Everything alright?" Larry asked.

Pam said simply, "Everything's fine."

AJ raised an eyebrow at Jori, which she returned with a smile to assure him of the same. "Tummy time, I see," she said, pointing to Lucy.

He nodded. "She calmed right down when she saw all the toys."

"Oh! Speaking of toys!" Everyone looked at Pam, whose whole face had lit up. "I have a little gift for Lucy back in the craft room. Let me go and get it." She scurried off and returned with a stuffed animal, which she handed to Jori. "I saw this and thought it was just too cute!"

Jori held up the plush toy. It was a smiley-faced octopus with a pale blue head and eight legs in a rainbow of pastel colors. "I love it!" she told her mother. Looking at AJ, she added, "It'll look great in the nursery... like an 'Octopus's Garden'."

He nodded. "I don't think we have any other Ringo songs represented in the nursery yet, do we?"

Jori's heart swelled with love for her soon-to-be husband and his solid background in Beatles trivia. "Not yet!" she sang. "Let's see if Lucy likes it." She plopped down onto the blanket next to Lucy and held the octopus out in front of her, shaking it to make the legs wiggle. Lucy gurgled and reached for it, her chubby fist latching on to one of the legs. When Jori let her have it, she promptly put the leg in her mouth and started drooling.

AJ laughed. "I think she likes it. Thanks, Pam."

Pam smiled at him. "My pleasure! You know I love nothing more than to spoil my granddaughter!"

Watching the exchange between them, Jori felt her worries fading away. She could see that her parents were trying. Maybe AJ wasn't the man they would have chosen for her, but out of love for her and for their granddaughter, they would accept him into their family anyway.

Later that night, once the dinner table was clear and the baby back in bed, they sat around looking at an album of old photos from her parents' wedding and discussing the finer details of AJ and Jori's upcoming nuptials.

“I don’t think I want to wear a veil over my face; that’s so old-fashioned,” said Jori, frowning at a picture of her mother walking down the aisle, her face obscured by layers of white tulle. “I’d rather just wear a wreath of flowers in my hair.”

“That would be pretty,” replied Pam, nodding. She seemed determined to prove to Jori that she’d meant what she had promised. Jori appreciated the effort to be supportive, but it was unnerving to hear her mother agreeing to everything she suggested without sharing her own opinions.

“And for my bridesmaids’ gowns...” Jori watched her mother’s face carefully. “I’m thinking orange...”

She was rewarded when Pam’s pleasant smile melted into a gaping grimace. “Orange?!” she squawked.

Jori smirked. Many a therapist had listened to her lament her parents’ disapproval over the years, but even Jori had to admit... sometimes, she brought it on herself.

All in all, their visit to her parents’ house had been a far better experience than Jori had anticipated. A trip worth taking, she decided, as she slammed AJ’s trunk lid over the last of their luggage. AJ was already strapping Lucy into her car seat, so Jori went to tell her parents goodbye.

“I’m so glad you came to tell us your big news in person,” her mother said, as she hugged her tightly. “Promise you’ll keep me posted on your wedding plans.”

“I will... as long as you promise not to insult my color scheme. I’m serious about the orange, you know.”

Pam sighed as Jori pulled away. “Even if it will clash with your hair?” she asked, fingering Jori’s cinnamon-colored split ends.

Jori grinned. “So I’ll dye it a different color for the wedding. Black, maybe. It’ll be perfect if we get married around Halloween!” She laughed at the look on her mother’s face.

“You kids should probably get on the road soon. Looks like it’s going to rain,” said her father, glancing at the dark clouds overhead. He pulled Jori into his arms for a quick hug. “Tell that fiancée of yours to drive safely. And that if his fingernails are still black at your wedding, there’s no way in hell I’m giving him my daughter’s hand.”

She laughed. “I’ll tell him. ‘Bye, Dad.”

The first low rumble of thunder sounded as they pulled out of the driveway, and no sooner had they merged onto the interstate than the skies opened and the storm clouds

cut loose. They drove down the highway in a downpour. Even at full speed, the windshield wipers could barely cut through the sheets of torrential rain sliding down the glass, and the headlights cast blurry halos around everything. Lucy screamed in the back, terrified by the thunder, and Jori sat bolt upright in the front, afraid the rain would wash them right off the road.

AJ cranked up the music, claiming it helped him to concentrate, but not even Jori's Beatles playlist could comfort her, not with the rain beating relentlessly on the roof of the car and her baby crying in the back seat.

"The long and winding road..." Paul McCartney's voice rose above the roar of the storm.

As the endless miles of rain-soaked interstate stretched before her, Jori sighed. It was going to be a long ride home.

15. Brian (VI)

Cold air, heavy with rain, rattled around in his lungs. Little clouds of breath puffed out of his open mouth as he panted. His heart was pounding, as fast and as hard as his feet upon the wet pavement. Dead leaves squished beneath them as he ran through the darkness. The icy wind whipped through his hair and the fallen leaves, pelting his face with stinging raindrops as he looked over his shoulder.

Suddenly, in the midst of the darkness, there was light. At first, it was just a pinprick in the distance, like the glimmer of sunlight at the end of a tunnel. But it grew nearer and seemed to split itself in two, twin halos of light that expanded outward, filling his vision. They were bright, almost blinding.

He stopped, frozen, but the light kept coming, so close it threatened to swallow him up. He couldn't see anything, and as the light surrounded him, his fatigue turned to fear.

He was going to die.

The thought crossed his mind a split second before he felt a crushing blow, and the light faded to impenetrable dark.

When Brian opened his eyes, he was not lying cold and wet in the middle of a dark street, but warm and dry in his own bed. The gray light of dawn was peeking through the window blinds, and Becci was leaning over him, saying his name. "Brian... are you awake?"

"Yeah," he exhaled, although it was getting harder for him to be sure. The dreams he'd been having were becoming more frequent – and also more vivid. He could still smell the rain in this latest dream and feel its chill on the back of his neck. He could hear the

wind whistling through his ears as he ran into it, his head ducked so that he could see his shoes pounding against the pavement. Even his heart was starting to race, as it had in his dream, making him feel like he really had been running, even though he knew he must have been asleep in bed the whole time. Wanting to be sure, he looked up at his wife. "I didn't sleepwalk again last night, did I?"

"Not that I know of," said Becci. "You were sure restless, though. I let you sleep in a little longer than usual. You should get up. It's after seven, and you need to be in town for your appointment at nine."

Brian nodded, slowly sitting up. It was easier to feel alert with his heart pumping adrenaline through his body.

"I've gotta go, or I'm gonna be late for work. I love you." Becci bent and kissed his cheek. "Talk to the social worker about these dreams," she whispered into his ear, and then she was gone. He heard her talking to Cal in the kitchen, their voices fading as they went out the back door, and the garage door opening and closing as her car rumbled out of the driveway.

Brian sighed, supposing she was right on both accounts: he should get up, and he should talk to the social worker. He'd scheduled the appointment to meet with her after his last visit to Dr. Robert, but now that the day had arrived, he felt oddly uneasy. There was no reason to be nervous, he told himself, no painful procedures to endure, only harmless conversation. What was so bad about that? Brian supposed it was just that the dreams themselves made him uncomfortable, so talking about them wouldn't be easy. But he got up anyway, ate breakfast and took his pills, showered and got dressed, and drove into Lexington.

The transplant social worker, Joan, had an office in the heart institute, so he met her there. Once the usual formalities were out of the way, Joan plucked her eyeglasses from her tangle of salt and pepper hair, perched them on the bridge of her nose, and peered down through them at a file in front of her. "So Brian, Dr. Robert tells me that ever since your transplant, you've been troubled by bad dreams." She looked up again, raising her eyebrows.

Her voice was kind, and there was no judgment in its tone, but Brian still felt embarrassed. *Troubled by bad dreams...* It sounded like the sort of problem a child would have, not a grown man. But Joan was still looking at him quizzically, waiting for him to elaborate, so he cleared his throat and said, "Yeah... I have these recurring nightmares, and one time, my wife even found me sleepwalking in the middle of one. I've never done that before."

"Could you describe the dreams?"

Brian nodded. "There are two different ones." He started with the dream about the crying baby, repeating what he'd told Dr. Robert about the similar nightmares Becci had experienced after giving birth and his belief that they were stress-related. "I really

haven't had any anxiety, though," he added, "other than in the dreams, I mean. Health-wise, I'm feeling better than I have in over a year."

"That could be the reason you started having the dreams after the transplant and not before," said Joan. When he looked at her in confusion, she explained, "You know what it's like to have lost your health. When you found out you needed a heart transplant, I imagine you felt some anger... sadness... maybe even a degree of denial at first. In other words, you went through a grieving process, just as you would over losing a person who was precious to you."

As he thought back to those dark days following his diagnosis, the brave faces he and Becci had put on over the holidays to mask the uncertainty they were facing in the new year, Brian's throat felt dry. He swallowed hard, wishing Joan would offer him a glass of water.

She was still talking. "You were on the transplant list for ten months, during which you lived each day with the fear of dying before a heart became available. You may have even have come to accept the possibility of your death. But you didn't die. You got a new heart, and your health was restored. And now the fear has changed. You know how much you have to lose because you've faced losing it all before. Even though you're doing well, it's normal to worry that something will go wrong – that your new heart will fail, too, or that your body will reject it. The baby in your dreams may be your son, but it also might represent something else: your new life. You said that in some versions of the dream, the baby's crying in the crib, and in others, the crib is empty, but you can still hear the crying. This could be a subconscious reminder that you only have so much control over your own fate – a hard pill for any of us to swallow, no doubt."

The social worker sat back in her chair, seeming satisfied with her own psychoanalysis. Brian was not. Frowning, he said sarcastically, "So I suppose it's death I'm running from in the other dream?"

Joan was not vexed. She folded her hands and prompted, "Tell me about the other dream."

So he told her about the nightmare from which he'd awoken that very morning. "The details change – like in the dream last night, it was raining. I don't remember it raining before, but then again, I couldn't tell you what the weather was like in the other versions. I'm always outside, though, and I'm always running... running away from something, I think, though it's never clear what exactly. It's always dark, and all I see is a light. I guess the light could represent death – you know, 'don't go into the light!' and all that – but in this last one, it looked more like... headlights." He paused there and pressed his lips together, wondering if he should tell her what he really thought the dream meant.

Joan blinked behind her glasses. "Headlights?"

“Yeah... I mean, I was running down the street, and I turned and saw these bright lights coming for me, and then... I think I got hit, but that’s when I woke up.” He looked at the social worker, still debating, and finally decided to say what was on his mind. She was there to help him, after all, and she couldn’t do that if he wasn’t completely honest with her. “My donor died in a car accident,” he said. “I don’t know any other details, but I can’t help but wonder... What if I’m dreaming of her death?”

“You mean imagining what her death might have been like?”

Brian considered the question, then shook his head. “No... these dreams, they don’t feel like my imagination. They feel more like... memories.”

“Memories of your donor?”

“Yeah.” Brian knew she must think he was crazy. It sure sounded crazy, but he tried to explain anyway. “They’re so much more vivid than normal dreams, and every time I dream them, I remember more details when I wake up, like the memories are getting clearer. I’m dreaming of places I’ve never been, things I’ve never done. Like running – I’ve never been a runner. I used to play sports, before I got sick, but jogging was never my thing. And the nursery in the baby dream – it’s not Cal’s room. It’s nothing like Cal’s room or any room I’ve seen, but I can picture it so clearly.”

“You may have seen a room like it before, maybe just in a picture or a movie, and not remember it. They say we never invent faces in our dreams, only dream of faces we’ve seen in the real world. In fact, most of our dreams are based on real life experiences.”

“But maybe they’re not *my* real life experiences,” said Brian.

Joan raised her eyebrows. “So you think you’re experiencing parts of your donor’s life in your dreams?”

He shrugged. “I know it sounds impossible, but... yeah. That’s what it feels like.”

“But you said yourself that you don’t know any other details, besides her cause of death. How do you know you’re dreaming about the life of a person you know nothing about?”

“How do I know I’m not?” Brian countered. “I don’t know. It’s just a feeling I have. I’m not dreaming about my own life, so it must be hers.”

Joan studied him for a few seconds, then smiled. “Brian, have you ever heard of cellular memory?” she asked. When he shook his head, she elaborated, “It’s the theory that other organs besides the brain can store memories or personality traits. It stems from a phenomenon that’s said to occur in some transplant recipients, in which the recipient takes on characteristics of his or her donor, such as tastes in food or music. For example, there’s a well-known case of a middle-aged woman who reported craving beer and peppers after receiving a new heart and lungs. She had never liked those foods before, but found out later that her donor, a young man, did. There have been several

other cases documented that defy medical or psychological explanation, but personally, I've never known any myself."

Brian stared at her through wide eyes. Her words had sent a surge of adrenaline shooting through his body, and soon, his heart – his donor's heart – would start hammering. "But... that's just like me!" he blurted. "It's not just the dreams. I've had weird food cravings, too. My favorite food has always been homemade macaroni and cheese, the way my mom always made it, but it doesn't taste right anymore unless I put lemon juice on top. What if that was something my donor did?"

Joan offered the shrug of a skeptic. "A lot of things can alter your sense of taste. Medications, for one."

"What about music? You can't tell me my medications have changed my taste in music. I'm a music teacher. I used to listen to gospel music, R&B, Motown. Now my radio is always tuned to the classic rock station. I've been listening to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd... groups I've always respected for their place in music history, but never went out of my way to listen to before. So why now? It's like there's a part of *her* inside me." He pressed his hand to his chest, feeling the pulse of her heart against his palm. "Not just her heart, but a part of her *soul*."

The social worker shook her head. "Brian, forgive me for bringing it up. You may indeed be one of the rare few who experiences this phenomenon, but there's no scientific proof that cellular memory exists. Remember, the heart is just an organ, a muscle made of tissue, like any other. It doesn't hold memories or house the soul, and the idea that either could be transferred in a transplant is—"

"Then why bring it up?" Brian interrupted. "Why bring it up, if you don't believe in it?"

"Forgive me," Joan apologized again. "I shouldn't have. It's not healthy for you to dwell on your donor. This is exactly why we limit the amount of information we give out about donors. The heart you feel beating in your chest belongs to you now. You shouldn't feel as if you're sharing it with someone else."

Brian frowned, feeling a sense of betrayal towards the social worker who was supposed to be on his side. How dare this woman plant such a seed in his head and then try to squash it? How dare she tell him how he should and shouldn't feel?

Seconds before he stood up and walked out of her office, he looked the social worker in the eye and said, "...But I do."

"Brian, come to bed."

Brian looked up from his laptop to see Becci standing in the doorway, dressed in a nightgown and slippers.

“It’s late,” she said. “You’ve been on the computer all night. Can’t you just let this thing go for tonight?”

“Let it go?” he repeated. He had been researching the concept of cellular memory on the internet all day, ever since getting home from the heart institute. He had pored over articles on the phenomenon, played videos about the theory, and posted on forums for fellow transplant recipients to share their experiences.

The general consensus in the medical community was that cellular memory was the stuff of science fiction, with no clinical evidence to support the theory, but Brian had read several strange stories that said otherwise. How else could one explain the case of a man who had emerged from his transplant with a newfound love of classical music, after receiving the heart of a musician who had died clutching his violin case to his chest?

Brian stared at his wife for a few seconds and then shook his head. “Becci, I feel like I have a piece of someone else’s soul inside me. How am I supposed to just ‘let this thing go’ and sleep when I’m worried that as soon as I close my eyes, I’ll start dreaming of her death again?”

Becci sighed. “I take back what I told you this morning. I wish you’d never talked to the social worker about the dreams.” She shuffled off, calling a vague “goodnight” over her shoulder.

Brian felt annoyed, but he and Becci had once vowed they’d never go to bed angry, and he was determined not to let it happen that night. He reluctantly bookmarked the website he’d been reading, shut down his laptop, and followed her back to their bedroom.

“Thank you,” she whispered, when he climbed into bed beside her.

“Sorry for snapping at you,” he said, leaning over to kiss her goodnight. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she replied and rolled over onto her side, her usual sleeping position. Brian lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling, his hand resting on his chest as his mind raced, too full of thoughts to relax. It took a long time for him to settle down, but finally, he drifted off to sleep. And when he did, he dreamed.

The dream started the same as before. He was running through the rain, his shoes slapping against the wet pavement. The icy wind whipped through his hair and the fallen leaves, pelting his face with stinging raindrops.

He tried to keep his head down, but he kept looking back over his shoulder. The street was dark and deserted, but suddenly, in the midst of the darkness, there was light. At first, it was just a pinprick in the distance, like the glimmer of sunlight at the end of a tunnel. But it grew nearer and seemed to split itself in two, twin halos of light that expanded outward, filling his vision. The headlights were bright, almost blinding.

He forced himself to look away, but he could still hear the growl of an engine gaining on him, the roar of tires splashing through puddles. When he chanced another glance over his shoulder, the truck was coming right for him. Startled, he spun around and tried to jump out of the way, but his foot sunk into a pothole he hadn't seen. He tripped, turning his ankle as he stumbled out into the street. As he straightened up, he was bathed in brilliant light. He stopped, frozen, but the headlights kept coming, so close they threatened to swallow him up. He couldn't see anything, and as the light surrounded him, his pain turned to fear.

He was going to die.

The thought crossed his mind a split second before he felt a crushing blow, and the light faded to impenetrable dark.

Brian awoke and found himself lying in the dark on the floor beside his bed. Somewhere overhead, a light switched on, and Becci's face appeared, hanging over the side of the bed. "Brian? Are you okay??" Her voice trembled, and her eyes were wide with fright.

He assessed his condition. His chest didn't hurt, and his heart wasn't pounding hard – yet. He rotated the ankle he'd twisted in his dream; it felt fine. His body didn't seem to be broken. The only thing that hurt was his back, probably from falling out of bed. "I'm fine," he grunted, sitting up slowly. "Just had another nightmare."

"The same one?" Becci folded her arms beneath her chin and looked down at him in concern.

"The running one." He drew his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, stretching out his spine as he thought back to the dream. He found he could remember more details than ever before. "It was a truck that hit me – her, I mean," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I could just tell. The headlights were higher off the ground than a car's."

"Okay... so you think your donor died getting hit by a truck." *So what?* She didn't say as much, but he could hear the unspoken words in his wife's tone of voice.

He buried his face in his knees, picturing the dark street of his dreams, the bright lights speeding toward him, surrounding him. All of a sudden, it hit him. He sat up straight, letting his arms fall to his sides. "It didn't even try to stop," he said. "It didn't slow down, didn't slam on its brakes, didn't swerve out of the way. I would have heard the tires squeal if it did. I was running right in the path of its headlights, and the truck did nothing to avoid hitting me – her. It's like it was..." He trailed off, shaking his head, as the horrible realization sank in.

"What?"

Brian stared at his wife with tears welling in his eyes, his whole body shaking as his heart – *her* heart – hammered against his ribcage. “It wasn’t an accident,” he whispered. “My donor was murdered.”

16. AJ (IV)

It was raining on that dark day in May, when AJ woke up and dressed for work. The sun was already up, but hidden behind gray storm clouds, so it was still quite dim in the bedroom he shared with Jori. Her side of the bed was empty, the sheets ruffled from where she had restlessly tossed and turned. He knew she’d spent a long night up with Lucy, who still woke every few hours for feedings. AJ wished there was more he could do to help, but Jori had been insistent about breastfeeding, and he wasn’t exactly equipped to do that.

He found them both in the baby’s room, Jori in the rocking chair and Lucy in her arms. She was nursing. With one strap of her tank top lowered and her long hair draped over her shoulder, Jori looked beautiful as she held their baby to her breast. AJ stood in the doorway, just admiring her for a moment, before he snuck into the room.

“Morning, babe,” he whispered, bending down to kiss her bare shoulder. He squeezed in behind her, resting his hands on the back of the rocking chair as he smiled over her shoulder at Lucy. “Somebody was hungry, huh?”

“Uh-huh. Breakfast is served,” said Jori, sounding tired.

AJ watched the baby suckle her swollen breast with gusto. His eyes were drawn to the new ink shining on Jori’s skin. There, on her left breast, in a cloud surrounded by sparkling stars, was the name *Lucy*. AJ had gotten a matching tattoo on his chest, right over his heart. As a tattoo artist, he’d thought it was bad luck to put someone’s name permanently on his body, but that was before he’d known what it was like to love someone so unconditionally and eternally. The love he felt for his daughter was as everlasting as the ink in which her name was written.

Lucy in the sky with diamonds.

He could have stood there forever, just staring down at her, and later, he would wish he had. But the dull gray light filtering in through the window shade was deceiving; it was later than it looked, and he had to get downstairs to open the store.

“I gotta go.” He planted a kiss on Lucy’s forehead and another on Jori’s. “I’ll see ya later.”

“See ya,” Jori echoed, as he slipped out from behind the rocking chair and swept out of the room.

As he descended the stairs, AJ thought about the day ahead of him. It was a busy time of year. Business had picked up with the arrival of warmer weather, and the end of the second quarter was near, which meant quarterly reports to finish. He knew Jori had plenty to keep her occupied upstairs, what with a baby to care for and a wedding to plan, so she was far from his mind as he sat in the back room, working on his report while Howie ran the store.

In the beginning, it had been the other way around: AJ had manned the storefront, while his business partner handled the paperwork behind the scenes. But gradually, AJ had begun to take over more of the responsibilities, wanting to be self-sufficient in case Howie ever left him for a better opportunity or a business of his own. He was feeling more confident than he ever had about the store’s future; second quarter sales were up, and for once, it appeared as if Vintaj might actually turn over a profit, instead of barely breaking even. The boost in sales couldn’t have come at a better time.

He was singing along to the radio as he looked over the budget, when he heard the scream from above. Up until then, he hadn’t been paying any attention to the noises upstairs; he’d learned to block out the sound of Lucy’s crying – it was either that or drive himself crazy listening to it. But now he realized it had been oddly quiet before the scream had shattered the silence.

Alarmed, he jumped to his feet and ran into the back hall, where he heard footsteps pounding down the stairs. He met Jori at the base of them. Her face was a mask of fright. “Something’s wrong!” she sputtered. “Something’s wrong with Lucy!”

“What?” He grabbed her by the shoulders. “What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

Jori was hysterical. “I... I don’t know!” she shrieked, her voice shrill. “She’s so still. She’s so still. I think she’s-”

“Shh!” AJ could fill in the blank in his head, but he couldn’t bear to hear her say the word out loud. “Did you call 911?” he shouted over his shoulder as he started up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

“No, not yet.”

“Damn it, Jori, why not? If there’s something wrong with her, you get on the goddamn phone and call 911, right now!” He stormed into the apartment and made a beeline to Lucy’s bedroom, his heart hammering in fear at what he might find inside.

He could hear Jori somewhere behind him, fumbling for her phone. As he crossed the room to Lucy’s crib in the corner, he heard her shaky voice say, “We need an ambulance,” and rattle off their address. He looked down into the crib. Lucy was there, lying flat on her back, her head lolled to one side. She was completely motionless, her

eyes closed, mouth partway open. “My baby, she’s not breathing!” He reached a trembling hand through the slats of the crib and held it over her mouth and nose, feeling for the faint breeze of her breath. He felt nothing. “I went to get her up from her nap, and she wouldn’t wake up!” He put his hand on Lucy’s shoulder, lightly shaking her. She didn’t stir. “I think she’s…” His hand moved to her chest, his fingers sliding under the neck of her sleeper. He pressed down, praying for the fluttery feeling of a pulse beating beneath his fingertips. Her skin was cool to the touch. “I think she’s dead!”

“No! Lucy, no!” AJ screamed, scooping Lucy up and clutching her to his chest. She felt limp, more like a doll than the warm, wriggly baby he was used to holding. He carried her into the kitchen, where Jori was pacing, the phone to her ear. “We’re taking her to the hospital, now,” he said.

Jori shook her head. Cupping her hand over the phone, she replied, “They said to wait. The ambulance is already on its way.”

It was the longest wait of AJ’s life, but it must have only taken a matter of minutes for the sirens to make their way up the street. A trio of EMTs tramped up the stairs and came into the apartment. Two of them took Lucy from AJ’s arms, while the third led AJ and Jori out of the room. She asked them to show her the room in which they’d found Lucy, so they took her into the brightly-painted nursery, where she asked them all kinds of questions. AJ answered without thinking, his mind still in the other room with his daughter. The interview passed by in a blur; later, he would barely remember it.

Finally, one of the other EMTs came to say, “We’re going to transport her to the hospital now.”

AJ looked up hopefully. “Is she alive? Did you save her?”

“We’re trying every measure to resuscitate her, sir, but so far, she hasn’t shown any signs of life. You and your wife should prepare yourselves for the possibility that we’re not going to get her back.” He gave them a grim, sympathetic look, putting a hand on AJ’s shoulder. “Can you follow us in your own vehicle?”

AJ nodded. Without a word, he reached out and took Jori’s hand. He squeezed it tightly, feeling the stone of her engagement ring digging into his skin. The pain was almost a relief, a reminder that he could still feel something. Up until then, he’d only felt numb. But he knew instinctively that more pain would follow, a pain far worse than he could prepare himself for.

He led Jori out of the apartment, snatching the keys to her truck off the hook by the door on his way. They followed the EMTs down the stairs and out into the parking lot, where the ambulance sat, its lights flashing. It was still raining, but a small group of spectators had gathered to gawk. Howie appeared out of nowhere and put an arm around AJ. “Is there anything I can do?” he asked. “Do you want me to drive you to the hospital?”

AJ shook his head. “Just watch the store,” he said, but in that moment, the store didn’t really matter. Throw the doors open wide; let the looters come and rob the place dry. He didn’t care. His only concern was the baby in the back of that ambulance.

“I will. I’ll be praying, too,” said Howie.

“Thanks, man.” AJ shook him off and took Jori over to her truck. She had spray-painted the white pick-up with a rainbow of colors, creating a tie-dyed effect. It looked out of place in a scene of such tragedy. “You want me to drive?” he offered, and Jori nodded, climbing into the passenger seat. He slid behind the wheel and crammed the key into the ignition. When he turned it, her Beatles music started blaring. Jori quickly shut it off.

They rode to the hospital in silence.

Sitting in a small waiting area in the hospital emergency room, AJ was struck with déjà vu. “This waiting is the worst part,” he ranted, anxiously jiggling his foot. “I about drove myself crazy waiting when we brought you here. You know, when you were... having Lucy...”

He trailed off, looking over at Jori. She was hunched over in the chair next to him, staring down at her hands, which were clasped tightly in her lap. Her hair hung limply over her slumped shoulders, hiding her face. She made no effort to respond to him.

“It’s gonna be okay, babe,” he whispered, sliding his arm around her. He pulled her to his side and held her close, rubbing her shoulder as he tried to console her with promises he couldn’t keep. “The doctors and nurses are working on her. They’re gonna get her back. She’ll be okay. It’ll all be okay.”

But he was wrong on all counts.

When the emergency room doctor came to speak to them, AJ jumped up out of his seat to meet her. “I’m Dr. Rigby, the attending physician,” she introduced herself briefly, not bothering to extend her hand. Her grim face told him the truth before she could say another word. “I’m so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. McLean,” she started, and neither of them bothered to correct her, for AJ and Jori were too stunned. “We did everything we could to revive Lucy, but she didn’t respond to any of our efforts. I’m very sorry, but your daughter has died.”

For AJ, it felt like the wind had been knocked out of him, and for a few seconds, he couldn’t breathe. He doubled over, his knees threatening to buckle, as all the color in the world seemed to fade to gray. The sound of Jori’s voice brought him back. “Oh God,” he heard her whimper, and he looked over to see her face fall into her hands. Knowing he needed to stay strong for her, he lowered himself back into his seat and

slipped his arm around her shoulders again. He could feel her trembling as she started to cry.

Looking up at the doctor, all he could say was, “How?”

Dr. Rigby sank into the seat on the other side of him. “I’m afraid we won’t know until we run some more tests. From what we observed and the history you gave, Lucy seemed like an otherwise healthy baby who, for reasons we may never know, stopped breathing in her sleep.”

“But how?” asked AJ, shaking his head, unwilling to accept such a vague explanation. “How does that even happen? She *was* a healthy baby! What the hell happened to her??”

“I assure you, Mr. McLean, we’ll do our best to get to the bottom of it. I know this is difficult to hear, but when an infant dies unexpectedly, it’s required to allow the medical examiner to perform an autopsy. In some cases, the autopsy will give us the answers we’re looking for. But sometimes, no clear cause of death stands out, and in those cases, it may be attributed to what’s known as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. You’ve heard of SIDS?”

He nodded, hearing her words but hardly processing them. All he could think of was the doctor telling him, “*Your daughter has died,*” her voice echoing in the hollow space inside his head.

“Someone from the medical examiner’s office will want to ask you both some questions – again, standard protocol in a situation like this. But before that happens, would you like to see Lucy?”

AJ looked at Jori. She shook her head, but he nodded. “Yes... please.”

“Of course. Come with me.” The doctor stood, and he got up to follow her, but Jori sat still.

“Babe?” he asked gently. “You really don’t want to see her?”

She shook her head again, hugging her arms around herself. “I can’t. I can’t stand to see her like that. Please. Don’t make me do it.”

“Okay. Okay.” Surprised, AJ looked from Jori to the doctor.

“That’s fine,” Dr. Rigby assured them both. “Mr. McLean, if you’d like, I can still take you to see your daughter.”

He looked uncertainly at Jori. “I’m gonna go see her, Jor, okay? I... I just want...” To hold her one last time? To say goodbye? He wasn’t sure; all he knew was that he couldn’t pass up what might be the last moment he got to spend with his baby.

Jori nodded. “Go,” she croaked, her voice catching in her throat.

“I’ll send someone in to sit with her,” said the doctor quietly, as she led AJ out of the waiting room. “We have some wonderful grief counselors here at the hospital who might be able to help.”

“Thanks,” he forced himself to reply, though he didn’t see how any stranger could take away the pain he knew was coming. He felt too numb to feel it then, but subconsciously, he knew how much his heart would hurt when the shock that had anesthetized him finally wore off.

He followed the doctor down a long hallway and into another room, where Lucy lay in the center of a long table. She looked so small lying by herself on that big table, and in his mind’s eye, he saw her as a newborn in her crib in the NICU, pink and perfect, with plump, rosy cheeks and ten tiny fingers and toes. He remembered being scared to touch her through the tangle of tubes and wires attached to her, but when he had, her skin had felt as warm and soft as it looked.

She looked different now. There were no tubes or wires this time; her body was wrapped in a white blanket, as if she were sleeping. But he could tell, this time, that she wasn’t just sleeping. Her cheeks were not rosy anymore; her face was pale gray, almost bluish. When he touched her, she felt cold and stiff. He knew she hadn’t just slipped away; she’d been dead since before Jori had found her.

“Would you like to hold her?”

A nurse appeared at his side, playing a gentle hand upon his arm. He nodded, allowing her to guide him to a chair and bring him the baby. When she placed Lucy in his arms, AJ looked down at her and thought, *How can this be happening?* Just over three months ago, he’d sat in a similar room at this same hospital and held his daughter for the first time. Just that morning, he’d watched Jori do the same. He remembered the way Jori had rocked her so gently, the way Lucy had suckled her so vigorously. She’d been alive when he’d left for work that morning, alive and healthy and fine. So how could this have happened? How, only hours later, could she be dead?

“It might take a few weeks to finish the investigation and get the autopsy results,” said the officer who came to question AJ and Jori. “The autopsy itself will be done within a couple of days, and then your daughter’s body will be released to whichever funeral home you choose to make the arrangements.”

But AJ couldn’t think of planning a funeral for a baby whose life had only just begun, and Jori just sat catatonically at his side, only speaking when addressed specifically by the officer. He knew it would be up to him to handle things, but how could he, when he felt like his heart had been ripped out of his chest, right through the place where her name was written permanently?

Lucy.

For the last year, ever since he had found out she was coming, she had been his whole life. He had lived and breathed for Lucy. How could he be expected to keep breathing, to go on with his life, without her in it?

It was horrible driving home that day, just him and Jori, entering the apartment that was filled with reminders of Lucy: her high chair in the kitchen corner, her toys scattered across the living room floor, her beautiful nursery looking just as they'd left it. AJ didn't blame Jori one bit when, on her way back to their bedroom, she closed the door on her masterpiece. He couldn't bear to look at it, either.

17. Brian (VII)

The world wide web offers a wealth of information, but wading through it can be overwhelming. For Brian, it was like diving for a penny in a vast pond. He knew the information he sought was out there, if only he knew where to search. But finding information on his donor was almost impossible, with the few details he'd been given.

He had spoken to the hospital social worker again the day after the dream in which he'd discovered that his donor's death may not have been accidental at all. But Joan had only been able to repeat the same information she'd given Becci the day of his transplant: The donor of his heart had been a woman in her twenties, who was killed in a car accident in Ohio. "You know that's all I'm allowed to tell you," said Joan apologetically.

Brian knew. She'd made it clear, both before and after his transplant, that the hospital was required to keep all other information about his donor confidential. The transplant program would facilitate written communication between him and the donor's family, if he wished, but although he had written a letter before leaving the hospital, it had gone unanswered. Joan had also warned him that might happen. "It may take time for your donor's family to feel ready to correspond, or you may never hear back from them," she'd said. "Even if you do, you're required to wait at least six months before we can release any information that would allow you to communicate directly with the family or meet face-to-face, and if that's only if both parties are open to the idea."

But Brian couldn't wait three more months, knowing there was no guarantee his donor's family would even respond to his note of gratitude. He couldn't stop thinking of her, the stranger whose heart beat inside his chest. Someone had struck her with their truck, not bothering to stop, slow down, or swerve around her. In a way, Brian had become a witness to her murder. And if the street in which she'd been slain was as empty as it had seemed in his dreams, he was the sole surviving witness, which meant two things: first, that his donor's killer was probably still somewhere out there on the streets, and second, that he might be the only one who could solve the mystery of her murder.

In the weeks following his discovery, he had become obsessed with the idea of bringing his donor's killer to justice. There had to be more clues hidden in his dreams, he thought, and he'd started to look forward to sleeping, hoping to find answers inside his nightmares. But sleep was hard to come by when his mind was constantly racing, keeping him awake, and when he did dream, he saw only the same things he'd seen before. Even if he did remember more details from the dreams, he doubted they would be enough to take him much further without knowing more details about his donor. That was when he had decided to start searching. The hospital may have prohibited the release of certain information, but that didn't mean he couldn't seek it on his own.

So he turned to the internet, that endless ocean of information. Day after day, while Becci was at work, Brian sat at home on his laptop and searched. He spent hours looking up articles and obituaries from Ohio newspapers published the week of his transplant. He browsed pages upon pages of search results, scrolling and skimming until his eyes glazed over from the strain. *I'll know her when I find her*, he kept telling himself, but deep down, he worried he wouldn't.

The stress of the search was starting to get to him. He realized it one day as he sat on the living room sofa with his computer on his lap, while Calhan played with his toy cars on the carpet at his feet. Normally, Becci still dropped their son off at his grandparents' house on her way to work, but Brian's mother had called that morning to say she'd come down with a cold and wasn't up to babysitting. "Looks like someone's staying home with Daddy today," Becci had announced, smiling at Brian. He could tell she'd thought she was giving him a rare treat. Before the obsession with finding his donor had overtaken him, it would have been a treat to spend the day with his son. He had needed time after his transplant to rest and recuperate, but just as before, his days had been long and lonely, and he'd always looked forward to four o'clock, when Becci came home with Calhan. But now Brian found himself groaning when he heard the garage door open because it meant giving up on his search for the day. He didn't know how to explain that to Becci, though, so when she'd asked, "You can handle him, can't you, hon?" he'd smiled and said that, of course, he could. He was starting to wish he hadn't.

"Shh... Can't you keep it down, Cal?" he begged as he scrolled through another page of search results, his eyes barely leaving the screen. His son was crawling around on the floor with his fire truck, making high-pitched siren sounds that Brian found distracting. "Daddy's trying to concentrate."

But Calhan, not quite two, couldn't understand. "*Whoooooooh!*" he wailed, crashing the fire truck into Brian's foot.

"Ouch, damn it! Stop that!" Brian snapped, jerking his foot up off the floor. Calhan, startled by this harsh reaction, stared up at his father for a stunned second, then screwed up his face and started to cry. Brian sighed. "Oh, Cal... I'm sorry, buddy." He set the computer aside and scooped his son up into his lap, stroking his back as Calhan buried his face in Brian's shoulder and sobbed. When he glanced back at the laptop and saw the clock in the bottom corner of the screen, Brian realized the reason for the overreaction: it was well past Calhan's naptime. Sure enough, as soon as Cal had

calmed down, he fell asleep on Brian's shoulder. Brian carried him carefully back to his crib and put him down, praying he would stay asleep. Then he tiptoed back out to the living room and picked up his laptop again.

It was while Calhan was napping that he came across an article from *The Cincinnati Enquirer* about a hit-and-run accident that had occurred in the early morning hours the same day as his transplant.

"The pedestrian, Marjorie J. Wilder, 23, of Lockland, was walking in the 600 block of Wylee Avenue when she was struck by the unidentified vehicle. Wilder was transported to the hospital, where she later died of her injuries."

He read those two sentences over and over again, remembering what Becci had told him when he'd woken up after surgery: *"She was a woman, in her twenties, from Ohio, who was killed in a car accident."* The details fit, but he couldn't know for sure until he found out more. He entered the name "Marjorie J. Wilder" into the search engine and found her obituary. The small, black-and-white photo that accompanied it showed a young woman with long hair and an impish grin. As he scanned the obituary, his eyes lingered on one line.

"Marjorie, known as 'Jori' to those closest to her, enjoyed art and music, especially by her favorite band, The Beatles."

Brian thought of his own love of music and his newfound preference for classic rock. He remembered the pleasure he'd felt in listening to Beatles songs in the car with Becci. Then he pictured the brightly-painted baby's room in his dreams, with the mobile that played John Lennon's "Imagine," and he knew. He knew in his heart – *her* heart – that this was his donor.

The revelation brought with it a sudden rush of emotion. The words on the page blurred before his eyes as he reread the obituary, wanting to know more about the life of the woman who had saved his.

"...Surviving are her parents, Larry and Pamela (Reinhardt) Wilder of Crawfordsville, Indiana and her fiancée, Alexander J. McLean of Lockland. She was preceded in death by her infant daughter, Lucy Sky Diamond McLean..."

She had been a mother. He had already known this on some level, just as he'd known that the nursery in his dreamscape was not Calhan's. He thought of the crying baby in the crib, which was sometimes empty. She had lost a child. He could imagine nothing worse. The heart that beat inside him had been broken.

Wanting to know more, he ran another search for the name of her daughter and found a second obituary. It was very short, just like the life of the baby, who had only been three months old when she died. It did not include a cause of death.

Brian continued to delve into his donor's past, becoming so immersed that he did not even hear his son wake up. It wasn't until Calhan started to cry that he looked at the clock and realized two hours had passed since he'd put the toddler down for his afternoon nap. Still, Brian felt a touch of annoyance as he slid the computer off his lap and stood up, stretching his legs. "I'm coming, Cal!" he called, as he walked back to Calhan's bedroom.

He was suddenly struck with déjà vu.

How many nights had he followed the sound of Calhan's crying in his dreams, entering a nursery that was nothing like the one in which his son slept? Yet the room had always seemed familiar to him, as familiar as the child he was going to comfort. Only now did he realize the baby in his dreams may not have been his son, but his donor's daughter. Not Calhan... but Lucy.

When he came into the room, Calhan was standing up in his crib, clutching the rail. Brian was relieved he hadn't tried to climb over it yet. "Ready to get up, buddy?" he asked, hoisting him out of the crib. He held Calhan close for a few seconds, savoring the feel of his son's warm body cuddled against his chest. He couldn't imagine the kind of grief Marjorie must have gone through after losing her daughter. Just thinking about it hurt his heart.

Her heart.

Maybe it was remembering.

18. Jori (V)

Jori felt numb. Absolutely numb. Like a patient high on morphine, she had drifted through the last few days in a sort of trance, unfeeling and hardly aware of what was happening around her.

She knew that her baby was dead. They had taken Lucy away in an ambulance to the hospital, then the morgue, and finally, the funeral home.

Jori had not seen her.

She knew that AJ had been on the phone constantly, making arrangements, telling family, accepting condolences from their friends.

Jori had not listened to the conversations.

She knew that people had been stopping by with meals, knowing she wouldn't be up to cooking.

Jori had not tasted their food.

She knew that family and friends had come from out of town to attend the services. They had stood in line at the visitation to hug her and offer their sympathy.

Jori had hardly felt their embraces.

She knew that the minister had said lovely things about Lucy at the funeral, sharing anecdotes from her three months of life that AJ had written down for him. But Reverend McKenzie had not known Lucy personally; she had not even been christened. The funeral service he gave was standard.

Jori had hardly heard his words.

After the service, she had slipped away, wandering down the street to the liquor store, where she bought a bottle of vodka that she carried in a brown paper bag back to the apartment building. Upstairs, friends and family had gathered to offer support and sympathy. They'd brought food, and her mother had tried to get her to eat, but Jori wasn't hungry. All she wanted was a drink. She sat downstairs, sipping straight from the bottle in the back room of AJ's store. It was closed for the day so that he and his employees could attend the funeral, and Jori figured she could hide out there for awhile before anyone found her. She wished she could disappear completely.

As a teenager, she had taken pills to numb her pain. Her parents didn't drink and had never kept liquor in the house, so it wasn't until college that she'd experienced the anesthetizing effects of alcohol. This discovery had sent her down the dark path that had led her to AJ, and together, they'd journeyed through the depths of depression and addiction and found the light again.

Lucy was that light. Lucy in the sky with diamonds, shining her light into their lives as if she were their sun. They'd both stopped drinking after finding out Jori was pregnant. They hadn't brought any alcohol into the apartment since Lucy's birth. But with her death, the sun had burnt out, plunging them back into darkness, and Jori could no longer abstain from drinking. She sat in the dark, slowly drinking herself to death.

With every drop, she felt closer to her daughter – or closer to forgetting her daughter had ever existed. She wasn't sure which she wanted more. Only her love for AJ had kept her from taking her own life the day that Lucy had died. He was the only one in the world she still cared about, and she knew it would destroy him if she died, too. He loved her more than she had ever loved herself.

He didn't blame her for Lucy's death. He kept reassuring her that she'd done nothing wrong. The investigators who had interviewed them both apologized for their many questions, promising them it was just a part of their protocol. The doctor said it was likely SIDS, pointing out that incidences were highest in sleeping babies between two and four months old.

Still, Jori blamed herself.

She took another swig from the bottle. The liquor barely burned as it went down, for even her throat had gone numb. A dizzy sort of daze had dulled her senses and settled her thoughts. Light-headed, she lowered her chin to AJ's desk and closed her eyes, her grip loosening around the bottle of vodka. She started to drift off, welcoming the impending unconsciousness.

"Jori?!"

AJ's voice brought her back to her senses. She jerked awake, just as he appeared in the doorway.

"Jori! What the hell are you doing down here all by yourself?"

Apparently, he had been looking for her. She shrugged, not bothering to hide the liquor bottle. If he hadn't already seen it, he would surely smell it on her breath when he came closer.

"Drinking?" he asked, looking down at her in disgust. "Alone?" He took the bottle from her and turned it around to see the label. "Straight vodka? Fuck, Jori, are you trying to kill yourself??"

"Maybe," she mumbled, laying her head back down on the desk.

"God damnit." He stomped off, his footsteps fading as he disappeared with her liquor. She heard a gurgling noise as he poured it into the bathroom sink, followed by the sound of running water as he washed it down the drain. When he came back, he grabbed her chin roughly between his fingers and wrenched her head up off the desk.

"Ow!" Jori whined, trying to twist out of his grasp.

He held on, forcing her to look at him. "Don't you do this to me, Jori. Don't you *dare* do this to me. I need you here; do you understand me? I've already lost Lucy. I can't lose you too. Don't make me. I know this is hard, but you have to be strong. You have to be strong and stay here with me."

His fingers were digging into her flesh, but it was a different kind of pain that made her eyes well with tears. "I can't," she whimpered, the tears spilling over. "I can't live like this."

"Yes you can," he said fiercely. "You and I had a life before Lucy, and we'll have a life afterwards. It won't be easy, but we'll keep living, and eventually, it'll get better. You'll see. We can still get married... have more kids..."

“No!” said Jori, yanking her chin out of his hand. His face blurred before her as she glared at him through watery eyes. “I don’t wanna have another baby! You think I wanna go through this again?!”

“Okay... okay!” AJ backed off, holding up his hands in defense. “I didn’t mean anytime soon. I just meant... sometime. When we’re both ready.”

Jori sniffed, shaking her head. “I’ll never be ready.”

“Okay. That’s okay. And if you still feel that way in a few years, it’ll be okay then too. Whatever you do, just please don’t give up on *us*. I need you, baby. Promise you won’t give up.” He looked at her with pleading eyes, waiting for a response.

“I won’t,” whispered Jori, though she wasn’t sure it was a promise she could keep.

“Thank you.” He sat down on the edge of the desk and heaved a sigh, his shoulders slumping. “I know things will never be the same, but I want you to know, I still love you, Jor. I’ll never stop loving you.”

She knew he meant to comfort her, but it hurt Jori to hear the words, knowing how his feelings could change in a heartbeat. Lucy had cemented their love for each other. Without her, what was left to keep them together? Still, she echoed, “I love you, too,” because she knew it was what he needed to hear.

He kissed her tenderly and took her hand, dragging her to her feet. “C’mon, let’s get you up to bed so you can sleep it off. Things will be better when you wake up.”

But Jori awoke hours later with a hangover and a horrible, hollow feeling inside. The only thing heavier than her head was her heart, which felt like it was breaking with every beat. The numbness had worn off with the alcohol, leaving behind only pain. Inescapable, unbearable pain.

She longed to feel numb again.

19. Brian (VIII)

Days after his discovery, Brian found himself parked on the very street where his donor had died.

The street itself was nondescript, hardly recognizable in daylight. After all, he had only seen it when it was dark in his dreams. But the record store across the street looked identical to the photograph he’d seen on the store’s website. Housed in the lower level of a two-story brick building, it had a big picture window featuring a cluttered display of

concert memorabilia and a neon sign over the door that spelled out the store's name: *Vintaj*.

It was owned by Marjorie Wilder's former fiancée, Alexander McLean, and when Brian had learned of the store's existence, he had wanted to come. When he discovered its location, a mere two blocks down the street from where the hit-and-run had occurred, he knew he *had* to come.

Becci had been against the idea. It was only a two-hour drive to Lockland, Ohio, but she worried about Brian traveling that far alone. "What if something happens?" she'd fretted.

"Like car trouble, you mean?" he'd teased her, knowing that was the furthest thing from her mind. "If the car breaks down, I'll call a tow truck."

"Brian Thomas Littrell, you know that's not what I mean," she'd replied, putting her hands on her hips and giving him a stern look. He returned it with his most charming smile, the one he knew she was unable to resist.

"Babe, my heart's fine, and that's because of her and whoever agreed to donate her organs. I owe them both my life. The least I can do is go up there and see what I can find out. If I see the street where she died, maybe it'll help me remember more details from my dreams. Maybe I'll even meet her fiancée."

"What would you even say to him if you did?" Becci wanted to know.

"Thank you, for starters," Brian said and then shrugged. "I'm not really sure what else. I guess I'll figure it out on the drive up."

She hadn't been happy about it, but he'd made the trip anyway, and now, sitting in his car outside the record store, Brian realized he still didn't know what to say to the man inside. He couldn't just waltz in and announce, "Hi, I'm the proud new owner of your girlfriend's heart!" That would be too weird. But he felt like some sort of stalker just sitting there, scoping out the place, so he knew he would have to go in and say *something*. He'd driven too far just to turn around and leave.

Summoning his courage, he climbed out of the car. He crossed the street and stopped on the sidewalk outside the entrance to the record store. Then he sucked in a deep breath and held it as he reached for the door handle. A bell tinkled over his head as he opened the door and walked inside. A man behind the counter looked up, acknowledging him with a nod and a wave. "Hey. Looking for anything in particular today, or just browsing?"

For a moment, Brian hesitated, unsure of how to respond. He recognized the man from photos he'd seen online: deep brown eyes, receding black hair, artfully-trimmed goatee, and tattoos everywhere. He was the owner, the fiancée, the one Brian had come to talk to. But he had no idea how to begin, so instead, he said, "Just browsing."

Alexander nodded. “Cool. Lemme know if you need anything.” He returned his attention back to the magazine he’d been reading behind the counter.

Brian wandered slowly through the store, pretending to browse while he worked out what to say. He fingered racks of vintage band t-shirts and thumbed through bins of old records. He gazed in wonder at the wide array of posters that plastered every inch of the walls. He flipped through a box of old prints and pulled out a photograph of the John Lennon Memorial in Central Park, a circular mosaic inscribed with the word *IMAGINE*. Someone had arranged flower petals in the shape of a peace sign around the center circle. Finding himself drawn to the beautiful picture, Brian decided it would work as the opening he needed. He carried it up to the counter.

“Ready to check out?” asked Alexander, standing up.

“Just about,” said Brian. He set the print down on the counter and proceeded to rifle through a box of buttons on the edge of the counter, stalling for time. “Cool place you got here,” he remarked, hoping the comment sounded off-handed.

“Thanks. This your first time stopping in?”

“Yeah. I’m not from the area. I live two hours south of near, near Lexington.”

“Oh, cool. So what brings you to Lockland?” Alexander asked conversationally.

“Just visiting someone,” said Brian vaguely, keeping his eyes on the buttons. “How long y’all had this place?”

“Going on three years now.”

“Nice.” His fingers closed around a Beatles button that said “*All You Need is Love*” in a psychedelic font. “I’ll take this, too,” he said, setting it down on top of the *IMAGINE* print.

Alexander looked down at the two items. “Beatles fan, I take it?”

“Yeah... only recently, though. It’s the weirdest thing – I had a heart transplant last November, and ever since, I’ve been listening to the Beatles and other rock bands from that era, stuff I never really listened to before. Isn’t that crazy?”

Alexander raised his eyebrows. “Pretty crazy,” he agreed, ringing up Brian’s purchases. “You look good, though, man. Four months doesn’t seem like a long time to recover from something that major, but I never would have guessed.”

It wasn’t the reaction Brian had hoped for, but he was struck by something Alexander had said. “Four months, that’s right. Good math!”

The careful tone of flattery he'd inserted into the comment had exactly the effect he desired. Alexander snorted and shook his head. "Not really." He looked down at the button in his hand, running his thumb over its smooth surface. Then he added, "It's just that I lost someone close to me in November. When you lose someone that special, you never forget how long it's been."

For the first time, Brian caught the scent of whiskey on his breath as he spoke, and his heart – *her* heart – ached for the man she had left behind. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

"Thanks. That'll be \$12.78, by the way." Alexander dropped the button into a small bag with the photograph. "You would have gotten along great with my girlfriend, Jori. She was a Beatlemaniac."

As Brian handed him a twenty dollar bill, he looked directly into Alexander's eyes and said, "I know."

When the two men locked eyes, Brian could see the look of bewilderment flicker across Alexander's face, which paled a few shades. "What do you mean, you know?" he asked gruffly.

Brian hesitated, looking around the store. Besides the two of them, it was empty; he was the only customer. Still, he didn't want someone to walk in as he was having a conversation around such a sensitive subject. "Is there somewhere more private we could talk?"

Alexander hardly hesitated at all. "Howie!" he shouted suddenly. "Yo, D!"

A short, Hispanic man emerged from a smaller room at the back of the shop. "What's up?" he asked, looking between Brian and Alexander.

"My business partner, Howie," Alexander said, with a vague wave toward the other man. "Can you cover the counter for me? I need to talk to..." He looked uncertainly at Brian. "Sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Brian," he supplied, wondering if it would sound familiar. He had only been allowed to use his first name in the letter he'd written to the family of his donor. "Brian Littrell."

"AJ." The nickname suited him. As AJ extended his hand for Brian to shake, Brian noticed that even his knuckles were tattooed, and his fingernails were painted black, ragged around the edges where he had picked at them. "C'mon."

AJ led Brian into the back room, where there was a table and two chairs. They sat down, staring across the table at each other. "So what's your deal, Brian?" AJ asked finally. "Who are you really?"

Brian took a deep breath. "I think you may have figured that out," he said. "I'm the guy who got Jori's heart."

Time seemed to stand still, as he waited for AJ's reaction. For a few seconds, AJ just stared at him. Then he said, "Are you serious?"

Brian nodded. "I'm pretty sure. It all fits. I found her obituary online. I got my transplant the same day she died."

"Worst day of my life," muttered AJ, bracing his head against his hand as he slumped over the table. "Probably one of the best of yours, huh?"

Brian swallowed hard. "I sure felt blessed that day," he said, choosing his words carefully. "I wouldn't have made it much longer without a new heart. You and Jori gave me the greatest gift I could ever hope for you. Her heart saved my life. So thank you."

AJ nodded, acknowledging Brian's gratitude without looking at him.

In the brief silence that followed, Brian remembered how he had felt when he'd woken up in the hospital after his operation: weak, sore, but grateful... so grateful. *Thank you*, he had whispered to his donor, after hearing her heart beat for the first time. Now he looked at her grieving fiancée and wondered if there was a way to give him back a part of the loved one he'd lost.

"Do you want to feel it?" he asked timidly. "Her heart?" He unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt and parted the material to expose the tip of the scar, barely visible over the top of his undershirt. "Here," he said, reaching out to take AJ's hand.

AJ recoiled. "No," he said quickly. "No, that's okay."

"Are you sure? I don't mind."

"Thanks, but I'm sure." Abruptly, AJ stood and crossed the room to a small desk in the corner. "It wasn't my idea to donate her organs, you know," he said, opening the bottom drawer. "They asked at the hospital, and I just did what I thought she'd want."

"Still... thank you," said Brian, watching as AJ pulled a flask out of the desk drawer. He twisted off the top and took a long swig, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You want some?" He offered the flask to Brian, who shook his head. "Yeah, you're probably not supposed to drink after a heart transplant, huh? That's smart. Jori liked her liquor a little too much. Not as much as I like mine, though." He sighed and slammed the flask down onto the desk. "So," he said, looking back at Brian. "Did you drive all the way up here just to say thanks?"

"No, not exactly. I wrote you a letter to say thanks, not long after the transplant. Did you get it?" It didn't really matter if AJ had received the letter or not. Brian was just stalling for time while he searched for a way to explain why he had come without sounding crazy.

AJ shrugged. “Yeah, I guess maybe I did. Sorry I never wrote back or anything. I was in a pretty dark place after she died. Still am, some days.” He picked up the flask again and took another drink.

“I’m sorry,” Brian said again. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to lose Becci – or Calhan. AJ had lost both a fiancée and a child.

AJ swallowed and set his flask back down. “So why did you come then?” he asked.

Brian collected his thoughts, struggling to put them into words. “Ever since the transplant, I’ve felt this... connection to my donor that I can’t quite explain. I wanted to know more about her, so I did some research online. I found Jori’s obituary and some articles about the accident, but they didn’t give me a sense of who she was as a person. I wanted to know about her life, not just how she died.”

It was half true, even if it wasn’t the whole story. Only through learning more about his donor’s life could Brian expect to answer the questions he had about her death. Like who would run down a young bride-to-be in the dead of night? And why?

AJ stared at with a hardened expression for a few seconds before his features softened. Sagging in his seat, he sighed and said, “So what do you wanna know?”

Brian considered the question. Of course, he knew more about Jori than he was letting on, but he wondered what other information AJ had to give. “I don’t know. Just... tell me about Jori. What was she like?”

AJ chuckled, actually smiling for the first time since they’d sat down together. “Oh man... where to begin? Jori was... Jori was a real firecracker. Wild... unpredictable... even explosive at times... but a whole lot of fun, too. She even had the red hair to prove it, though it was totally dyed. Her mom gave her so much crap about that color...” He paused to laugh, shaking his head. “I loved it, though. It was bright... and different. That was Jori. She was one of a kind.”

Brian smiled. “I didn’t know she had red hair. The only picture I saw of her was in black and white.”

“Really? Here... hang on...” AJ sat forward, pulling his chain wallet out of his pocket. From inside it, he took out a photograph and passed it across the table to Brian.

His breath caught in his throat as he looked down at the picture of a petite girl with vivid red hair that went almost to her waist, posing against a pick-up truck. The truck’s paint job looked like rainbow tie-dye, and it cast a bright backdrop against the neutral colors of her clothing. “She was beautiful,” Brian said, bringing the picture closer to his face as he peered into hers, noticing the blueness of her eyes and the light dusting of freckles across her nose.

“Yeah, she was. Seriously, the day I met her, it was love at first sight.” And AJ proceeded to tell him all about his and Jori’s history, how they’d met at a tattoo parlor in Florida, how he’d given up his whole life there to follow her here to Ohio, and how he’d opened the record store to support her as they started their new life together. It was strange and sad to hear the story told when he knew what a tragic turn it would take, but Brian sat back and listened without interruption.

“We even had a kid together,” said AJ, the light in his brown eyes fading as he glanced up at Brian. “I guess you probably read about Lucy.”

Brian nodded. “I’m so sorry,” he said for the third time.

AJ’s chin jutted forward as he clenched his jaw. Brian could tell he was trying not to cry. “When we first found out she was pregnant,” he went on hoarsely, “I didn’t know how to feel. But Jori was thrilled, and she got me excited about it too. We had a blast getting ready for the baby. We decorated her room with a Beatles theme, and Jori painted this whole mural on the walls; it was awesome.”

Brian could clearly picture it, the nursery from his dreams.

“And when she finally came, I felt...” AJ paused and shook his head, seemingly at a loss for words. “I can’t even describe the feeling.”

“I know that feeling,” said Brian. “I’m a father myself.”

AJ nodded. “Then you can imagine how it felt to lose her.” His eyes were bright again, shiny with unshed tears. “I loved that little girl more than life itself. When she died... I felt like my life was over. It was never the same after that. Jori took it even harder than I did. She just shut down. Fell apart. Started drinking again. She was drunk the night she died, you know.”

For the first time, Brian felt truly surprised by this bit of information. “She was??” None of the articles he’d read had mentioned it.

AJ nodded again.

“So what happened?” Brian blurted, before he could stop himself from asking.

“She was out walking. She got hit by a car.”

It was a truck, thought Brian, but that wasn’t the only detail that seemed off. “She was out walking in the middle of the night?” he wondered aloud. “The article I read said she was hit around two a.m.”

“Jori was a night owl,” said AJ, “especially after Lucy died. She had insomnia. She liked to go out for walks after dark, when no one would see her. She was still trying to lose her baby weight, and she was self-conscious about how she looked. I guess she’d stayed

up late drinking that night and decided to go out to get some air or stretch her legs or something.” He shrugged. “I don’t know; I’d already gone to bed. I woke up to the sound of screeching tires. I looked out the window, and that was when I saw her, just lying there in the street.”

His voice had taken on a flat, deadened quality as he narrated this sequence of events, but Brian was shocked. “So you didn’t see what happened?” he asked in a whisper.

AJ shook his head. “I’m guessing she stumbled out into the street and got hit. I don’t know, though. The car that hit her was long gone by the time I got out there.”

Brian bit down on his bottom lip. Here was a grief-stricken man who thought his fiancée’s death had been her own fault. How could he tell him otherwise, without revealing too much?

“You can’t blame her,” he said gently. “Whoever was driving should have stopped.”

“It wouldn’t have done much good,” replied AJ, looking at him sadly. “Jori would have died either way.”

He seemed to have resigned himself to this reality, but Brian wasn’t ready to accept it. He felt angry on behalf of his donor and this broken man she’d left behind. He wanted to see the person who had caused them both so much pain caught and put behind bars. He wouldn’t rest until justice was served.

But he had to rest, for only when he was at rest could Brian sleep. Only in sleep could he dream. And only in his dreams could he hope to see something that would shed light on this dark tragedy.

He did dream that night, the same dream as before. He was running down the very street on which he’d driven earlier that day. Cold air, heavy with rain, rattled around in his lungs. Little clouds of breath puffed from his open mouth as he panted. His heart was pounding, as fast and as hard as his feet upon the wet pavement. Dead leaves squished beneath them as he ran through the darkness. The icy wind whipped through his hair and the fallen leaves, pelting his face with stinging raindrops.

He tried to keep his head down, but he kept looking back over his shoulder. The street was dark and deserted, but suddenly, in the midst of the darkness, there was light. At first, it was just a pinprick in the distance, like the glimmer of sunlight at the end of a tunnel. But it grew nearer and seemed to split itself in two, twin halos of light that expanded outward, filling his vision. The headlights were bright, almost blinding.

He forced himself to look away, but he could still hear the growl of an engine gaining on him, the roar of tires splashing through puddles. When he chanced another glance over his shoulder, the truck was coming right for him. Startled, he spun around and tried to

jump out of the way, but his foot sunk into a pothole he hadn't seen. He tripped, turning his ankle as he stumbled out into the street. As he straightened up, he was bathed in brilliant light. He stopped, frozen, but the headlights kept coming, so close they threatened to swallow him up.

At first, he couldn't see anything, but as the light surrounded him, he could make out the silhouette of a pick-up truck. He saw a flash of color and recognized the paint job – rainbow swirls, spray-painted over the rusted white exterior, giving the illusion of tie-dye.

His pain turned to fear.

He was going to die.

The thought crossed his mind a split second before he felt a crushing blow. His body was thrown violently onto the hood of the truck. As his head collided with the windshield, he caught a glimpse of the face behind the wheel, as familiar as the truck itself.

Then it was cast back into the shadows, as the light faded to impenetrable dark.

Brian sat bolt upright in the dark, already breathing hard. He was trembling violently, enough to disturb Becci, who stirred beside him. "Brian?" she asked sleepily, sitting up. "What's wrong?" She looked over at him in concern, putting her hand on his shoulder to stop it from shaking. "Did you have another nightmare?"

He nodded. "That's not all, though," he whispered. "This time, I saw his face."

"Whose face?"

"The face of the person behind the wheel. The one who was driving the truck. The one who killed Jori. It was *him*."

"*Who*, Brian?"

He shook his head, not wanting to believe it, yet he was sure of what he had seen. "Her fiancée," he said. "It was AJ."

20. AJ (V)

Another spring had come to Lockland, Ohio, but AJ McLean saw none of its beauty and felt none of its warmth. His world had gone cold and gray the day Jori had died, for she had been the light of his life. Without her, there was only darkness.

The winter had been rough. Somehow, he had made it through the holidays and into the new year just by going through the motions, like a blind man who has memorized the way. He hardly slept, ate too little, and drank too much, but he continued to go to work each day because the record store was all he had left. He had lost his only child and the woman he'd planned to marry, the woman he'd followed to this godforsaken town in the first place. He couldn't lose his business, too. It was not just the only thing keeping him in Lockland, but the only thing keeping him alive, period.

But Vintaj seemed on the verge of collapse. It had always hovered somewhere between life and death, success and failure, but after suffering a steady drop in sales for the past three quarters, AJ feared its condition was terminal. He sat alone in the back room with his whiskey flask well in reach, running his hand absently along his receding hairline as he stared down at his monthly bank statement. His savings account had started to look even sparser than his scalp, the numbers dwindling down to nothing as he shelled out everything he had left to save the shop. He was broke, and despite the money he'd put into it, the store had failed to break even. He didn't know how he was going to dig himself out of this hole. It felt like he'd dug his own grave. Maybe it was time to lay his dream to rest, bury the business, and move on.

On to where? He didn't know. Back to West Palm Beach, maybe. He had family there. Friends. He'd once had a life there, too, but he'd given that up to start a new life with Jori. He supposed he could head home and try to salvage what was left of his old life. Or he could find a new home, make a new life for himself in a place he'd never been. He had done it before. Maybe it was time, once again, to put the past behind him and look toward the future. A fresh start might be just what he needed.

But freedom wasn't a luxury he would have for much longer.

When he heard the bell ring over the door, he looked up, ears pricked, like a dog awaiting its master. He felt an ember of hope flicker to life somewhere deep inside him. Customers were a rare commodity these days.

Howie was manning the counter, and AJ heard him speaking softly with the two men who had come in. He could tell they were men and that there were two of them by the sounds of their voices, though he couldn't make out what they were saying. Then, suddenly, Howie appeared in the doorway. "The police are here," he said, in a hushed tone. "They want to speak with you."

AJ wasn't worried when he stood up, slipping the flask back into his desk drawer. What did he have left to lose? He walked into the storefront with his head held high, and when he saw the two uniformed men, he pasted on a customer service smile and said, "Morning, officers. How can I help you?"

Neither one smiled back. The older of the two took a step toward him and asked, "Are you Alexander James McLean?"

That was when AJ felt the first hint of fear. “Yes,” he said uncertainly. “What’s this about?”

“Mr. McLean-” The officer took another step toward him, pulling a pair of handcuffs out of his back pocket. “-I have a warrant for your arrest.”

“What?!” he heard Howie sputter. “Why??”

But AJ knew why. Without being asked, he turned around and held his hands out behind his back, allowing the officer to cuff them together. To Howie, who was watching, wide-eyed in shock, AJ said, “I need you to call me a lawyer, D. Can you do that for me?”

“Sure,” Howie replied faintly, “but why? What’s going on, AJ?”

“You have the right to remain silent.” The second officer jumped in to read the Miranda Rights before AJ could respond. “Anything you say or do can and will be held against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights I have just read to you?”

“Yes,” said AJ, offering Howie a one-shouldered shrug. He allowed the officers to lead him outside, where their squad car was parked, and didn’t say another word until he was sitting in the back, on the way to the police station. Then he asked, “Mind telling me what I’m being charged with?”

The officer who was driving looked into the rearview mirror and caught his eye, confirming his worst suspicion. “The murder of Marjorie Jean Wilder.”

The presence of his newly-hired attorney at his side did not make AJ feel any more comfortable in the small interrogation room. Sitting across the table was the officer who had arrested him, while his partner stood, sentry-like, near the door.

“Mr. McLean, I’m Officer Campbell, and this is Officer Shears,” said the seated man, gesturing over his shoulder to the standing one. “Now that your counsel is here, we’d like to ask you some questions regarding your involvement in the death of your fiancée, Marjorie Wilder.”

“Jori,” said AJ in a flat voice. “She went by Jori. She hated to be called Marjorie.”

Officer Campbell nodded. “Tell me about the night Jori was killed. What happened?”

AJ glanced at the lawyer, who gave him a nod of approval. “I went to bed before midnight,” he began, intending to tell the same story he’d told every other time he had

been questioned about Jori's death. "Around two in the morning, I woke up to the sound of tires squealing, like when someone slams on their brakes really hard."

"Interesting," Officer Campbell interrupted, "considering the police who investigated the crime scene found no skid marks or any other evidence that the vehicle that struck Jori applied its brakes."

AJ met his eyes, returning his smirk with a glare. "Well, it must have, because I heard it," he insisted. "It startled me, so I sat up, and that's when I realized Jori wasn't in bed. I looked out the window of our bedroom, which looks out onto the street, and I saw her lying there."

The officer raised an eyebrow. "Your residence is two blocks away from where Jori was hit. You're telling me you were able to see that spot out your window and recognize her from that far away?"

"Well, I didn't know for sure that it was her," AJ replied quickly. "I just saw someone lying there and knew I had to help."

"So what did you do?"

"I ran outside. It was raining, so I got in my car and drove up the street until I got to her."

Campbell nodded and glanced down at the file in front of him. "Yes, I'm wondering about that," he said, shuffling through the pieces of paper. "According to the police report from that night, you transported Jori to the hospital yourself. Why didn't you call 911?"

AJ swallowed hard. "I don't know," he said. "I guess I panicked. I just wanted to get her to the hospital as fast as I could."

"But why not call from your apartment, as soon as you realized someone – not necessarily Jori – was hurt?"

AJ shrugged. "Like I said... I guess I panicked."

The officer seemed suspicious, but he accepted AJ's answer and proceeded to his next question. "So you drove Jori to the hospital in your own car – is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And what kind of car was that?"

"A Chevy Malibu."

“That’s interesting, because the surveillance cameras in the hospital parking lot show you entering and leaving in a Ford pick-up truck.”

AJ felt his face heat up. He took a deep breath and wiped his sweaty palms off on his pants, keeping his hands hidden under the table so the interrogator wouldn’t see them shaking. “Oh, yeah, that’s right. I forgot,” he said lamely.

“You forgot,” repeated the office in a sarcastic tone. His skepticism was evident. “Who did the truck belong to?”

“It was Jori’s.”

“And where is that truck now?”

“I don’t know. I sold it after she died.”

“To whom?”

“I don’t know, some junker. I sold it for scrap; it was a piece of shit, and there was blood on the seat from when I took her to the hospital that night.”

“We found the truck,” said Campbell bluntly, and AJ’s heart started to pound. “There wasn’t just blood on the seat. There was some on the front fender, too – the same fender that was visibly dented on the hospital surveillance video. We had to scrape through a layer of paint to find it. Were you the one who re-painted the car?”

“You can stop answering questions at any time, Mr. McLean,” his lawyer reminded him, but AJ forged ahead.

“Just to cover up Jori’s paint job, so I could sell it,” he replied quickly. “She had spray-painted it herself to look like rainbow tie-dye.”

“I thought you were just selling it for scrap metal,” Campbell reminded him, and AJ’s heart sunk as he realized he’d been caught in another lie. “Don’t bother trying to explain your way out of this one. We already tested the blood from the fender. We know it’s Jori’s. We know you were driving her truck that night. We can put two and two together, Mr. McLean. It all adds up to one conclusion: You were the one who hit Jori.”

“Don’t respond to that,” the lawyer hissed in his ear, but it was too late: AJ’s body language had said it all. He slumped forward over the table, burying his face in his folded arms.

“Talk to me, Alexander,” Campbell probed in a softer tone of voice. “Tell me what really happened that night. I already know the facts. Now I want to hear your side of the story.”

“My client needs a break from questioning,” snapped the lawyer.

“No.”

The room fell silent as everyone stared at AJ, who had spoken. He had lifted his head and was looking straight across the table at Campbell, the officer’s face blurring before his tear-filled eyes.

“Mr. McLean-” the lawyer persisted, but AJ ignored him.

“I’ll tell you what really happened. I did do it, alright? I killed Jori. I admit it,” he said, swiping at the tears that trickled out of the corners of his eyes. “But before you condemn me, you need to understand why. You need to know the whole story...”

21. AJ (VI)

AJ would never know what woke him up that night. All he knew was that it was still dark when he awoke, abruptly, in the middle of the night and that, at first, he was disoriented.

He sat up halfway, squinting blearily at the bedside clock. It was one-thirty in the morning, which meant he had only been in bed for a couple of hours. He lay back down and rolled away from the clock, intending to go back to sleep. That was when he saw that Jori’s side of the bed was empty.

AJ sat up again and reached over to his bedside table to turn on the lamp. He looked around the room, but Jori was nowhere to be seen. The sheets on her side of the bed were rumpled where she had slept – or rolled around, at least, since Jori rarely slept well these days. She had gone to bed with him before midnight, but she must have gotten up again after he’d fallen asleep.

For a full minute or two, he sat stewing over whether or not to get up and check on her. On one hand, he was still tired and wanted to go back to sleep. On the other hand, he was concerned about Jori and wanted to make sure she was alright. In the end, he realized he would not be able to rest until he knew where Jori was, so he dragged himself out of bed and went to find her.

It didn’t take long. When he padded into the darkened hall, he noticed a soft glow radiating from an open door to the right. Lucy’s bedroom. Invisible fingers squeezed his heart. He and Jori always kept the door to the nursery shut. The only time he had opened that door and gone inside since the day they’d come home from the hospital without their baby was when Jori had asked him to pick out the clothes Lucy would be cremated in. She couldn’t do it, she’d said. As far as he knew, she hadn’t been in the room since.

But she was in there now. Standing in the doorway, he could see her sitting in the rocking chair. She was hunched over, holding something in her hands – one of Lucy’s stuffed animals, by the look of it. He could see her shoulders shaking and knew she was crying. He hesitated, unsure of whether he should go in and comfort her or just let her be. With Jori, he never knew what to expect, and he couldn’t predict how she might react.

Her grief had manifested itself much differently from his own. While AJ had welcomed the support of friends and family, Jori had isolated herself, spending long hours locked up in her room, refusing to see anyone. Whenever he tried to talk to her about Lucy, she shut down, insisting she wasn’t ready. And although he had stayed sober for her sake, Jori had drowned her sorrows in alcohol. AJ had tried to get her help for her depression, even suggesting they attend grief counseling together, but Jori had declined every offer. She’d stopped seeing the therapist she had started talking to after Lucy was born, leaving AJ to live with the fear that he would wake up one morning or walk upstairs one evening after work and find her dead, too.

So in a way, it was a relief to find her in Lucy’s room, visibly upset but very much alive. He made up his mind and took a tentative step into the room. It was musty from being shut up for so long, but underneath the stale smell of dust, he could still smell the cloying scent of baby powder coming from Lucy’s changing table. The carousel lamp by the crib was on, splashing colorful shapes across the walls and ceiling. The light illuminated the mural Jori had so painstakingly painted. Neither of them had the heart to paint over it, nor had they packed up any of Lucy’s things. Her clothes were still hanging in the closet, and her toys and books were still stacked on their shelves. Sometimes Jori acted as if Lucy had never existed, but to AJ, it looked like she’d never left.

“Jor?” he whispered, and she jumped out of the rocker, startled.

“God, you scared the shit out of me!” she said shrilly, glaring at him through eyes that were red and puffy.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized quickly. “I didn’t mean to sneak up on you. I just wanted to see why you weren’t in bed. What are you doing in here?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she snapped, flinging her hands into the air. As the stuffed animal she’d been holding flew across the room, he recognized it as Lucy’s octopus, the one Jori’s mother had given her on their trip to Indiana.

He stooped to pick up the toy. “Do you always come in here at night?” he wondered aloud, winding one of its tentacles around his finger. “Or is this the first time?”

“Why does it matter? Why are you always so concerned about what I do, what I think, how I feel?”

He could tell that she'd been drinking. With a pointed look, he replied, "Because I love you, Jori."

"Well, you shouldn't," she muttered. It was half under her breath, but he heard it anyway.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. If you love me so much, do me a favor and leave me alone, okay?"

AJ just stared at her, looking for some sign of the woman he loved behind the walls she had built up around herself. Some days, she was hardly recognizable. He wanted to be there for her, but she wouldn't let him in. In the six months that had passed since Lucy died, their relationship had deteriorated to the point that he wasn't sure when or if they would ever get married. Out of habit, Jori still wore the opal engagement ring on her finger, but she hadn't made any more plans for the fall wedding she'd wanted. It was already November. The leaves had fallen from the trees and withered on the ground. Winter was on its way. AJ knew there would be no wedding that year.

But he still wanted to marry Jori someday. He still loved her, and so, although her response stung, he stood his ground. "No," he said firmly. "I will not leave you alone. You've been dealing with this alone for months and not doing a very damn good job of it. You need to open up and start talking to me about this stuff, Jori. We've been through hell together. We're never gonna heal if we don't help each other out. Let me help you."

He reached out to her, but she turned away.

"Jori, please," he begged, but she took a step toward the crib, ignoring him. He knew how stubborn Jori could be, but he was determined to break through her defenses that night.

Had he not been, she might have lived to see the light of morning. But AJ was just as stubborn as Jori, and he persisted until she finally cracked under pressure.

"Come on, babe," he said, coming up behind her and placing his hand on her back. "Talk to me."

"Talk to you about what?" she asked, without turning around. "About Lucy? About the day she died?"

"Whatever you wanna talk about." He rubbed her back in slow circles, gently encouraging her to keep going. "Just tell me what's on your mind."

She sniffed. "I can't stop thinking about that day," she said softly, and AJ was encouraged.

To him, it was a relief to hear her start talking, after months of keeping her thoughts to herself. But by the time she finished, he would wish she had never said a word.

“It was raining,” she went on, still facing the wall. “Lucy was fussy, and I was dragging. I just wanted to go back to bed. I put her down for her morning nap, but she wouldn’t go to sleep. She just lay here in the crib and cried.” Her fingers closed around the crib rail. “I tried to leave her – you know, so she could learn to self-soothe. I walked away and closed the door to her room. I went back to our room to lie down. I could hear her crying on the baby monitor. I tried to block out the sound so I could sleep, but I couldn’t. So I shut off the monitor.”

AJ’s heart sunk. He had a feeling that Jori had been harboring some feelings of guilt, as the one who had been with Lucy that day, and her admission that she had turned off the baby monitor confirmed these suspicions. “Baby, you can’t blame yourself,” he said, still stroking her back. “You couldn’t have heard her stop breathing on the baby monitor. She died in her sleep.”

Jori shook her head. “I could still hear her crying through the walls,” she continued, as if he hadn’t interrupted her. “I closed my eyes and lay there, waiting for her to stop, but she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t. So I got up and went to get her. I walked into her room, and she was still screaming her head off here in the crib.” She bowed her head, looking down into the bed in which their baby had slept. “I just wanted to calm her down. I grabbed her octopus, and I sort of shook it in front of her – you remember how she liked to watch the tentacles wiggle around.”

Though she couldn’t see him behind her, AJ nodded, a lump clogging his throat as he remembered Lucy’s slobbery smiles.

“I thought that would work, but she just wouldn’t stop crying. I couldn’t stand it anymore; it was driving me crazy. Literally crazy.” Her voice had started to shake. “I don’t know what came over me. I just know I couldn’t take it anymore. I just wanted her to stop crying. So I took the octopus...”

AJ’s grip tightened around the toy in his hand.

“...and I put it over her face, to cover her mouth... and I held it down.”

His heart jumped out of his stomach and into his throat, hammering so hard he could scarcely breathe, let alone speak.

“I closed my eyes, and I held it until I heard her stop crying.

“No,” whispered AJ, as he realized what Jori was telling him.

A sob escaped her throat. “When I lifted it off her face, it looked like she was sleeping.” Her voice had gotten so shaky, it was hard to understand. Still, AJ hung on to every

word. “So I went back to bed and lay down again, and I fell asleep. And when I woke up... I realized she was gone.”

“BULLSHIT!” The word spewed from his lips like venom, startling her. She spun around, tears streaming down her face. He glared at her, his heart beating pure rage through his veins. “You didn’t just ‘realize’ she was gone when you woke up. You let me go six months thinking she had died in her sleep, when all this time, you knew full well that you fucking *killed* her! You **KILLED OUR BABY!**”

Jori shook her head, but she did not deny it. All she said was, “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...”

AJ just stared at her. Through a fog of fury, he saw the woman in front of him, but he did not recognize her as the love of his life, the mother of his child. The person who stood before him was a stranger.

She quailed under his furious stare, stumbling backwards as if her knees were on the verge of buckling. Clutching her face in her hands, she let out another sob, then turned and ran from the room. AJ could hear her crying as she rammed clumsily through the apartment. Then the door swung open and slammed shut, and she was gone.

He was left standing alone in the center of Lucy’s room, reeling with the shock of Jori’s confession. In a matter of minutes, he rapid-cycled through a full range of emotions, from disbelief to anger, to sadness, and back to anger again when he realized he was still holding the stuffed octopus. His hand shook as he held it up, looking into its friendly, smiling face with revulsion. What had once been an innocent baby toy had become a murder weapon, the very same one his fiancée had used to smother their daughter.

Why? he thought desperately. *Why?* Jori had tried to explain, but he couldn’t understand how the woman he’d trusted to take care of his child could have done something so unspeakable. He couldn’t let her run away from this. He needed more than an apology. He needed answers.

“JORI!” he roared at the top of his lungs, storming out of the room. “JORI, GET BACK HERE!”

She was probably already outside the building, but she couldn’t have gone far. He spotted her keys still hanging on their hook beside the door and swiped them on his way out of the apartment. He took the stairs two at a time and barreled out the back door of the building, barely feeling the cold sting of the wind and rain as he made a beeline for her tie-dyed truck. He jumped in and jammed the key into the ignition, revving the engine to life. The tires squealed on the wet pavement as he peeled out of the parking lot.

There was no telling which way Jori had gone, but AJ turned right, heading toward the liquor store three blocks down the street. His instincts proved correct. He had only driven a few yards when his headlights splashed over a familiar silhouette, running on

the side of the road. She kept weaving, her hair whipping wildly in the wind as she turned her head to look at him. A red hot rage descended upon him as he squinted through the rain-soaked windshield, the wiper blades keeping time with his racing heart.

Acting on impulse rather than conscious thought, he pushed the pedal to the floor, forcing the old pick-up to accelerate. She twisted around to glance over her shoulder again as he came up behind her. Then she tripped, stumbling out into the street. In the split second before he hit her, AJ saw the look of horror in her eyes as his headlights shone directly into them and felt a short-lived sense of satisfaction.

Then he felt the impact against his front fender, heard the crunch of metal and glass and broken bones, and saw Jori's body bounce onto the hood of the truck and roll off again. And when he looked into the rearview mirror and saw the lifeless lump lying in the middle of the street, AJ just felt sick.

What have I done? he wondered, meeting his own wide, crazed eyes in the mirror. *Oh God, what have I done?*

22. Brian (IX)

Brian was watching the ten o'clock news on the small TV in his bedroom when a familiar picture appeared on the screen. He sat up in bed, turning up the volume.

"And now for an update on a story we've been following, the case of the Ohio man accused of murdering his fiancée in what had appeared to be a hit-and-run accident. Today in court, Alexander McLean pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter in the death of his girlfriend, Marjorie Wilder, last November. As part of a plea deal, McLean was sentenced to five years in prison in exchange for his guilty plea to the reduced charge. After hearing McLean's testimony, attorneys on both sides of the case are calling it a "crime of passion," claiming McLean struck Wilder with his vehicle after she admitted to-"

The newscaster's voice was cut off as the screen suddenly went black.

"Hey!" Brian protested to his wife, who was holding the remote. "I was watching that!"

"I don't want you obsessing over this anymore. It's not good for you," said Becci, climbing into bed beside him. "It's not good for us." She patted his bare chest. "And it can't be good for your heart either."

"My heart's fine," replied Brian, resting his hand on top of hers. In fact, six months after the transplant, his heart had never been better. Physically, he was fully healed. Emotionally, he felt freed, as if a weight had been lifted from his chest.

When he'd first gone to the police with what he had discovered about Jori's murder, they hadn't believed him. He had no physical evidence, only dreams to support his claim that Jori had been killed by her fiancée. But Brian had persisted, until the Lockland Police Department promised to reopen their investigation. When AJ was arrested, it made the local news, and Brian felt vindicated. All he had wanted was justice for Jori, whose murder had prevented his own untimely death. He owed her that much. And although he was disappointed to hear that AJ would only serve five years for the crime he had committed, Brian was glad it was over. Because of him, the truth was out. The man who had killed his donor was behind bars. Perhaps AJ's conviction would bring Jori's family some peace as well. But more than anything, Brian hoped that his nightmares would stop, now that his new heart was finally at rest.

"I'm so glad," murmured Becci, as she leaned over to kiss Brian. He smiled and took her face in his hand, wishing he could erase the lines of worry his illness had drawn around her eyes.

"Want me to prove it?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

She smiled back, and he could see her answer in her sparkling eyes. As she slid between the sheets, he rolled on top of her, throwing the covers over them both. The night was warm, and they'd left the windows open. They made love to the soft sound of crickets singing them to sleep.

Sleep came quickly for them both afterwards. The school year was winding down for Becci. Summer was on its way, and Brian was looking forward to having fun with his family, working in the yard with Becci, playing in the sun with Calhan, doing all the things he had been too sick to do the previous summer. These were the pleasant thoughts that lulled him to sleep, and he slept peacefully... until he slipped back into a never-ending nightmare.

The baby was crying again. Brian followed the sound down the darkened hallway and into the colorful nursery. He crept toward the crib in the corner, where the mobile twirled a menagerie of animals around in a slow circle, tinkling the familiar tune of "Imagine."

His eyes drifted upward, following the trail of stars to the ceiling, where the round mirror hung like the full moon in the sky, reflecting the red face of the screaming infant in the crib beneath it.

Lucy in the sky with diamonds.

He reached down into the crib and plucked the plush octopus out of one corner. He held it out for the baby to see, shaking it a bit to make the legs wave about, but her cries only escalated.

Sighing, he took a step backward, away from the crib. He could feel the blood rush to his pounding head, as his heart began to race. His fingers tightened around the octopus's head, slowly squeezing and releasing... squeezing and releasing... squeezing...

Then he stepped forward again. He raised a slender, white hand, still clutching the octopus, and reached a pale, freckled arm over the crib rail. As he watched the hand holding the octopus lower itself over Lucy's face, he realized what he was doing and tried to resist, but the arm moved as if it was attached to someone else's body. *No! Stop!* his mind screamed, but he said not a word as he pushed down, pressing the plush toy up against the baby's mouth and nose. He could hear her muffled cries escalate with pain and fright and feel the increase in pressure of the hand as it tried to stifle them. The eight tentacles hugged her face as the octopus slowly smothered her.

Even in the dream, it seemed to take a long time – minutes, rather than seconds. Finally, the screaming stopped. The squirming stopped. When he lifted the octopus off her face, the baby's mouth was still open, but her eyes were closed. She was silent and still, as if she were asleep. He sighed, feeling that he could finally get some sleep as well.

But Brian *had* been asleep.

When he woke, he was standing next to the crib. Calhan's crib. He looked down and saw his son, lying just as silent and still as the baby in his nightmare. Then he looked a little further and saw that he was holding Calhan's teddy bear in his hand.

In a horrible flash of *déjà vu*, he remembered Becci finding him this very same way and her words to him afterwards: *"If you could have seen how you looked when I walked into Cal's room just now, the way you were just standing there with this vacant stare on your face... it was creepy, Brian! It freaked me out."*

If his denervated heart could sense what was happening in his head, it would have skipped a beat when he realized what was happening. He hadn't just been sleepwalking, but acting out his dream.

Brian gagged, flinging the teddy bear across the room as if it were on fire. Then he reached down into the crib and desperately shook his son's shoulder. "Cal!" he cried. "Oh God, please don't be dead... please don't be dead..."

If the phone call from the hospital saying they'd found a heart for him had been a huge relief, it was nothing compared to the relief he felt when Calhan stirred and opened his sleepy blue eyes, blinking up at Brian in confusion.

"Oh thank God!" Brian gasped. "Thank God..."

Calhan's eyelids fluttered, and in a matter of seconds, he had drifted back to sleep, slurping on the thumb that had fallen out of his mouth the first time around. Brian stood by the side of his crib for a long time, watching him sleep.

But his relief was short-lived.

As his heart reacted to the rush of adrenaline and started to race, Brian turned and saw the teddy bear lying facedown on the floor. It occurred to him that he might have caught himself before he fulfilled the dream for real, woken himself up just in time. But that didn't mean he could keep it from happening again.

He had hoped the recurring nightmares would stop once he brought Jori's killer to justice, but now he realized he'd had it wrong all along. Jori wasn't just an innocent victim. She was a murderer herself. Her memory, his dream, told the true story: she had killed her own child.

His donor deserved to die.

But she hadn't died completely. As long as Brian was alive, Jori would never truly be dead, for a part of her lived on through him. He could feel it thumping away inside his chest. The sensation made him sick. He clutched at his chest, pressing his hand over his heart. *Her* heart. He wished he could stifle its beats the way its former owner had stifled her baby's cries. It felt foreign inside him, a soul-sucking alien that had taken possession of his body and control of his mind. The very heart that had saved his life now threatened to destroy him and the ones he loved. Brian had never felt more betrayed.

Tears blurred his vision as he looked back into the crib, resting his eyes upon his sleeping son. His whole body trembled as it hit him again how close he had come to hurting his child, a life he'd helped to create, a life he loved more than his own. The heart hammered against his ribs, each beat a threat. He knew he could not let it control him.

He took one step backward and then another, stumbling blindly out of Calhan's bedroom. The house was pitch black, but he felt his way into the kitchen, where he turned on the light. It gleamed off the blade of the largest kitchen knife as he slid it out of the drawer.

With the tip of one trembling finger, he touched the point of the blade. It was sharp. He pushed down, feeling it pierce his skin. When he pulled his finger away, he saw a bead of blood bubble out of the prick. He put the finger in his mouth and sucked on the blood, savoring the bitter taste on his tongue. He could feel the sting in his finger. Maybe it would distract him from the unimaginable pain of what he was about to do. What he *had* to do, to save his son from himself.

Pressing his back up against the counter, he held out the knife with both hands gripped tightly around the hilt and the blade pointed straight at the treacherous heart he could no longer trust. He closed his eyes briefly, praying for both mental and physical strength. The heart continued to pound adrenaline through his body, unaware of the fact that it was fueling its own demise.

When Brian opened his eyes, he stared down the point of the blade for a few seconds, while he steadied his shaking arms. Then, before he could lose his nerve, he took a deep breath and held it as he plunged the knife into his heart.

23. AJ (VII)

AJ's heart felt like it was racing a million miles a minute as he slowed the truck to a stop on the side of the road, threw it into park, and jumped out. He hoped he would look back and see Jori struggling to her feet, shaken, but not seriously hurt. But when he looked, all he saw was her unmoving shape still lying in the middle of the street.

He ran as fast as he could through the rain and dropped to his knees at her side, ignoring the cold moisture that seeped through the knees of his pajama bottoms. "Jori?" He reached out a trembling hand and touched her shoulder. She was only wearing a t-shirt and a thin pair of pajama pants, and his first, absurd thought was that she looked so cold, lying in a puddle of water on the pavement.

He slid his hand under the back of her head, intending to lift her off the ground and warm her in his arms, and that was when he felt something *warm* and wet flowing over his fingers. He looked down, and in the eerie red glow of his taillights, he could see the dark liquid swirling in the rainwater.

"Oh God, Jori, I'm so sorry," he choked out as he started to sob, the air hitching in and out of his lungs in short, gasping breaths. Without a further thought, he scooped Jori into his arms and stood, swaying with the effort of hoisting her up. With her head lolled back and her limbs hanging limply, she was like dead weight in his arms. He staggered toward her truck, struggling under the strain of holding her. He managed to pry the passenger side door open and slide her into the seat. Under the interior light, he could see fresh blood flowing from a wound in her head as she slumped forward against the dash.

He closed the door and darted around to the driver's side, jumped back in, and shifted into gear. "Stay with me, Jori," he begged as he sped off down the street, wondering if she would even survive the drive into Cincinnati... if she wasn't already dead.

Without taking his eyes off the road, he reached over and felt around until he found her neck. He traced her jawline with his fingers and pressed down. When he felt the faint pulse fluttering beneath his fingertips, he heaved a huge sigh. The sense of relief that radiated through him was more welcome than the warmth blasting from the truck's heater. "Thatta girl," he said, patting the side of her face. "Hang on, Jor. Just hang on."

In the emergency room of Cincinnati's Bethesda North Hospital, heads turned, once again, as a man, dressed in a bloody wifebeater and wet pajamas bottoms, barreled through the doors, carrying the limp body of a woman who was soaked with blood and rain.

For AJ, the déjà vu was devastating. As Jori was whisked away on a gurney, he remembered a similar scene: her hand being torn out of his grip as the medical experts descended upon her, after he'd rushed her to the same hospital, in labor, on what would become Lucy's birthday. He remembered his panic over the blood in the birthing pool and his fear that he might lose both his girlfriend and their unborn baby. He tried to remember the relief he'd felt later, upon learning that the doctors had saved Jori's life and delivered his daughter safely into the world, but it was difficult, for the world had turned upside down since that day. Lucy was dead, smothered by her own mother. Jori was close to death again, struck down by her own fiancée. In just nine months, AJ's whole family had fallen apart.

He had tried to hold himself together, for Jori's sake, but at that point, there was nothing left to keep him from falling apart, too. In the waiting room, he broke down, sobbing unabashedly into his blood-stained hands, as the events of the last hour replayed in his head like a bad movie on an infinite loop. He heard Jori confessing to killing Lucy... saw her running ahead of him through the rain-streaked windshield of the truck... felt the impact as her body bounced off the front fender. He could smell her blood on his hands, metallic and bitter. It was enough to turn his stomach. As bile slid up his throat, he lifted his head long enough to look around for a trashcan, fearing he was about to be sick.

That was when he saw the cop.

The police officer stood in the doorway of the waiting room, watching him. "Mr. McLean?" he asked, once he had AJ's attention.

AJ swallowed hard, leaving the taste of vomit on the back of his tongue. "Yeah, that's me," he said.

"I'm Officer Pepper, with the Cincinnati Police Department. Can I ask you a few questions about what happened tonight?"

AJ raked a hand through his thinning hair, stalling for a few seconds. "Yeah, okay," he agreed, trying to sound as casual as he could. The whole time, his mind was racing, frantically trying to work out what he would say in response to the officer's questions. Should he tell the truth, or should he try to cover it up?

"You told the triage nurse your girlfriend was hit by a car. You transported her here yourself, is that right?" AJ nodded. "Did you or anyone else call 911 before leaving the scene of the accident?"

Hit-and-run. Like a flashbulb, the phrase popped into AJ's head. He saw his way out and took it. "I didn't actually see it happen," he said. "By the time I got there, the car was gone."

The officer's eyes narrowed as he looked at AJ, his pencil poised over his pad of paper. Then he bent his head and started jotting notes. "So you didn't witness the accident. Who did?"

AJ shook his head slowly. "No one. I mean, besides Jori and whoever hit her."

"Where and approximately when did this happen?"

"On the street outside our apartment." AJ gave the officer his address. "It happened... I dunno, about an hour ago, at this point."

The officer looked at the clock. "So... around two a.m., you'd say?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

"And how did you know Jori had been hit?"

AJ told a story that started with the truth: he'd awoken suddenly and realized that Jori wasn't in bed. The rest he made up as it came to him: he heard the sound of screeching tires and looked out the window just in time to see taillights taking off down the street, leaving a body behind. He'd run downstairs and gone outside to find that it was Jori who had been hit. What she'd been doing outside at that hour, he didn't know – Jori had struggled with insomnia ever since the death of their infant daughter six months earlier.

When AJ mentioned Lucy, Officer Pepper paused to look up at him, then made another note on his pad. He asked a series of questions that made AJ suspect he was wondering if Jori had stepped into the street on purpose. AJ let him wonder. But at the same time, he wondered himself what Jori would have to say when she regained consciousness. *If* she regained consciousness. Would she remember what had happened and tell the cops who really hit her? If she did, AJ was in a world in trouble.

The doctor who came to speak with him next wasn't optimistic. "Mr. McLean? I'm Dr. Edison," the resident introduced himself, shaking AJ's hand. "Jori's been stabilized and sent off for some tests – X-rays and a CT scan. She has broken bones that will likely need surgery, but what I'm most concerned about is the trauma to her head. She's showing signs of a severe traumatic brain injury. The scans will reveal more than I can tell you now, but I want to prepare you for the worst."

And so, AJ was left in a state of limbo, waiting to see whether or not Jori would even wake up.

24. Becci (III)

Becci woke up to the sound of her husband's body falling to the floor, though it would be several more minutes before she discovered it. When she sat up in the dark, disoriented, all she knew was that something – a sound, a shake, she couldn't be sure – had jolted her out of a deep sleep.

She wasn't concerned until she went to wake Brian and found that he wasn't in bed beside her. Then she switched on the light and scrambled out of bed in a panic, her nightgown twisting around her bare legs. "Brian?" she called in a loud whisper, as she tiptoed up the hall, trying not to wake Calhan.

There was no answer, but she could see the kitchen light on at the end of the hall. She was afraid to call out again, imagining herself interrupting a robbery, but she couldn't sneak back to bed without knowing where her husband was. She flattened her body against the wall and peeked slowly around the corner, into the kitchen. The sight that awaited her was so horrible, she completely forgot her quest to stay quiet and let out an earsplitting scream.

Brian lay in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor. It was only once she rushed to his side that Becci saw the knife protruding from his chest.

She dropped to her knees beside him, one hand clamped over her mouth. Her other hand trembled as she reached out and lightly touched his shoulder. "Brian?" she whimpered, afraid to shake him and hurt him more. She thought she saw him twitch, but when she looked twice, she realized it was the knife that had moved. Its handle was quivering. She stared at it in confusion for a few seconds, watching the way it jerked ever so slightly from side to side, and then she understood: The knife was lodged in Brian's heart.

She felt her stomach turn and bile bubble into the back of her throat as she realized the knife twitched every time his heart beat. The urge to vomit was followed by a moment of relief. As long as the knife kept twitching, it meant Brian's heart was still beating, and if his heart was still beating, then he was still alive...

Becci swallowed back her bile and scrambled to her feet, running for the phone. She dialed 911 and was connected to a dispatcher. "Yes, I need an ambulance and the police right away," she told the dispatcher tearfully and gave her address. "I think someone broke into my home. My husband's been stabbed in the chest; I think the knife is in his heart..."

Struggling to keep her composure, she answered the dispatcher's questions and followed her directions. She tilted Brian's head back to protect his airway. She did not touch the knife, still twitching inside his chest. She took his hand instead and held it in hers as she waited for the ambulance to arrive.

The wail of a siren had never sounded so sweet. "I'll be right back, Brian," Becci whispered as she let go of Brian's hand. "Help is here." She ran into the front yard to meet the police car that was pulling into the driveway. Down the street, she could see the flashing lights of the ambulance approaching.

The two police officers who got out of the car would not let her go back into the house, insisting they had to make sure the intruder was gone. "But my son's still inside!" Becci cried, struck with a fresh wave of panic. "He's still asleep in his crib; he's only one!"

"We'll bring him to you, ma'am. We have to secure the scene and make sure it's safe for you to go back in."

She was left to watch helplessly as the pair of officers went in without her, holding their guns out in front of them. When the EMS squad arrived, they, too, insisted she stay outside while they went in. Becci waited in the front yard, dressed only in her nightgown and trembling from head to toe. She hugged her arms to her chest, as if physically holding herself together could keep her from falling apart.

The flashing lights on top of the two emergency vehicles cast eerie shadows across the house and yard, bathing Becci's world in shades of red and blue. She felt as if she were in the middle of a waking nightmare, unable to help her husband or protect her child.

In the midst of her nightmare, she was joined by several pajama-clad neighbors who had been awakened by the strobe effect of the lights shining in their windows. Her voice shook as she struggled to explain what had happened, but it helped to have them there, wrapping consoling arms around her and rubbing her shoulders as they whispered words of reassurance. One of them offered to stay with Cal while she went to the hospital with Brian, and Becci was grateful.

After a wait that seemed endless but probably only lasted a matter of minutes, one of the police officers emerged from the house, carrying Calhan. Becci could hear him crying and felt a stab of fear, afraid he had been hurt. Frantic, she ran across the yard, but the officer holding him called out, "It's alright, ma'am! He's fine, just scared. I'm afraid we woke him up," he added, handing the screaming toddler to her. Becci's fear melted into relief as she clutched Calhan to her chest, holding him tight. "The house looks clear, ma'am," the officer told her. "If anyone broke in, they're gone now. Did you actually see an intruder?"

"No," said Becci quickly, "but I heard something. It woke me up." Something about the tone of the officer's voice made her feel defensive. "*Someone* stabbed my husband, and it certainly wasn't me!" As soon as she said it, a startling thought occurred to her. "You don't think I did it, do you??"

The officer looked her up and down. There was a strange expression in his eyes, but it wasn't suspicion. More like... sympathy? "No," he said shortly. "I don't think you did it. Don't worry, ma'am. Whatever happened, we'll get to the bottom of it."

“How’s Brian?” Becci asked. “How’s my husband?”

“The EMTs are working on him. They should be bringing him out soon.”

“Can I go in?”

The officer placed a firm hand on her shoulder. He still had that same look in his eyes. “I think it would be better if you stayed outside.”

When they brought Brian out, Becci understood why. Her husband was strapped to a stretcher, and one of the medics was straddling him, his hands pushing repeatedly on the center of Brian’s chest, just to the right of the knife. She could see the hilt of her kitchen knife continue to jerk with each compression, but Becci knew what had happened: her husband’s heart had stopped. Just when she thought they were in the clear, her worst fear had been realized.

Becci’s knees buckled, and if she hadn’t been holding Calhan, she would have collapsed right there on the lawn. As it was, neighbors’ arms shot out to steady her, and Mrs. Holland, who had offered to babysit, reached for her son, saying, “Here, Becci, let me take him inside. You go with Brian. Go on, honey.”

At Mrs. Holland’s urging, Becci released Cal into her arms, planting a hasty kiss on his forehead. “Thank you!” she blurted, before she turned and tore after the EMTs, who were loading the stretcher into the back of the ambulance. “Please, may I ride with you?” she begged.

“Yeah, but you’ll have to sit up front. Follow me,” said the man who turned out to be the driver. He slammed the back doors shut, sealing Brian inside, and led her around to the passenger side of the ambulance. He opened the door and offered her his hand as she climbed up into the cab. Becci realized she’d never ridden in an ambulance before.

A voice crackled through the radio: “Let’s go lights and sirens on this one.”

The driver pushed a button to reply: “You got it. Lights and sirens all the way.” He turned to Becci. “Better buckle up.”

She did as the ambulance drove away, its siren sounding the alarm all the way into Lexington.

In the emergency department at Saint Joseph, the same hospital in which Brian had received his new heart, Becci sat in a small room, her head in her hands, waiting for news on her husband. When she heard someone say, “Mrs. Littrell?” she looked up, but the man in the doorway wore a navy police uniform, rather than a white doctor’s coat.

She recognized him as the officer who had brought her Calhan. “I know this is a difficult time, but do you have a few minutes to talk to me?”

“Okay,” Becci agreed, straightening in her seat as she tried to gather her thoughts. She raked a hand through her tangled hair, sure that she looked like a mess. One of the ER nurses, seeing that she had arrived still in her blood-streaked nightgown, had loaned her a pair of scrubs. They were too big, and she felt like she was floating in them, but at least she was fully-clothed.

The officer dropped into the seat next to her. “I wanted to ask you more about the alleged break-in you reported tonight. You told me earlier that you didn’t actually see the intruder – is that right?”

“That’s right,” said Becci, rubbing her swollen eyes. “I didn’t see anyone, but I heard-”

“You heard something, yes. Could you describe the kind of sound you heard?”

“I... I’m not sure.” She shook her head. “I was asleep. Whatever it was, it was enough to wake me up.”

“Did you lock up the house before you went to bed?”

“Yes, of course, we always do. Why?” As she waited for his response, Becci racked her brain, trying to remember whether it had been she or Brian who had locked up for the night.

“Well, we checked your house for signs of a forced entry – broken windows, torn screens, busted locks, anything like that. We didn’t find anything. It also didn’t appear that anything had been disturbed or taken, as in a burglary.”

Becci narrowed her eyes at the police officer, wondering what he was implying. “So then, who stabbed my husband?”

He pressed his lips together in a thin line, exhaling through his nose. After a pause, he said, “I spoke with the EMTs who transported your husband here. They told me that the knife he was stabbed with went in at an upward angle, with the blade turned horizontally. I don’t want to get too graphic with you, but when a person is stabbed during an attack, the assailant usually stabs with a downward motion, holding the knife with its blade turned vertically.” He demonstrated with his pen. “I know this is difficult to hear, but in Brian’s case, the angle and direction of the blade suggest that the wound was self-inflicted.”

Becci gasped. “What?! You think he stabbed himself? Why would he do that?”

The officer gave her that same look of sympathy he had outside her house. “That’s what I want to know.”

She shook her head. “Brian would never hurt himself. We have a happy marriage, a beautiful family, a great life! He loves his life! And he knows not to take it for granted. He almost died last year of heart failure, but a heart transplant saved his life. Brian wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize that.”

“So there are no problems in your marriage? No infidelity or financial issues that you and Brian have been dealing with?”

“No!” Becci insisted, hot tears prickling her eyes. “We’re happy! We love each other! ‘All you need is love’ – he said so himself!” She could remember him humming along to the song of the same title, the night of the Christmas concert. For some reason, the memory gave her a sick feeling deep down in her gut.

The officer nodded. “Alright. Thanks for your time. That’s all I wanted to ask you tonight, but we’ll be in touch as we continue to investigate. Hopefully Brian will be able to tell us more.”

“I hope so,” agreed Becci in a hushed voice, remembering how bad it had looked the last time she’d seen her husband. Almost an hour had passed since he had been whisked away from her. The officer left her still waiting for word on his condition, but also wondering.

Why, Brian? Why?

25. And In the End...

Jori

She was running. Cold air, heavy with rain, rattled around in her lungs. Little clouds of breath puffed from her open mouth as she panted. Her heart was pounding, as fast and as hard as her feet upon the wet pavement. Dead leaves squished beneath them as she ran through the darkness. The icy wind whipped through her hair and the fallen leaves, pelting her face with stinging raindrops. They mixed with the tears leaving sticky trails down her cheeks.

She tried to keep her head down, but she kept looking back over her shoulder, expecting to find AJ following her. The street was dark and deserted, but suddenly, in the midst of the darkness, there was light. At first, it was just a pinprick in the distance, like the glimmer of sunlight at the end of a tunnel. But it grew nearer and seemed to split itself in two, twin halos of light that expanded outward, filling her vision. The headlights were bright, almost blinding.

She forced herself to look away, but she could still hear the growl of an engine gaining on her, the roar of tires splashing through puddles. When she chanced another glance

over her shoulder, the truck was coming right for her. Startled, she spun around and tried to jump out of the way, but her foot sunk into a pothole she hadn't seen. She tripped, turning her ankle as she stumbled out into the street. As she straightened up, she was bathed in brilliant light. She stopped, frozen, but the headlights kept coming, so close they threatened to swallow her up.

At first, she couldn't see anything, but as the light surrounded her, she could make out the familiar silhouette of her grandfather's pick-up truck. She saw a flash of color and recognized her own paint job – rainbow swirls, spray-painted over the rusted white exterior, giving the illusion of tie-dye.

Her pain turned to fear.

She was going to die.

The thought crossed her mind a split second before she felt a crushing blow. Her body was thrown violently onto the hood of the truck. As her head collided with the windshield, she caught one last glimpse of her fiancée's face behind the wheel.

Then it was cast back into the shadows, as the light faded to impenetrable dark.

AJ

Outside the hospital, the light of dawn had lifted away the dark of night. Inside a windowless waiting room, AJ was oblivious to the change. He had drifted to sleep and now dozed under the same fluorescent lights that had burned brightly all night.

It was only when he felt a hand touch his shoulder and a voice whisper his name that he jolted upright, mumbling, "What time is it?"

"Just after seven," said Dr. Edison, the ER resident who had been treating Jori. "Mr. McLean, I need to talk to you about Jori. Are you with me?"

"Yeah... yeah," said AJ, rubbing his eyes. They felt sticky with sleep, but those may have been tears crusted in the corners. He blinked a few times to clear them and then looked at the doctor. "How is she?"

"I mentioned earlier that we were concerned about a head injury. We've been running tests all night, Mr. McLean. Unfortunately, they show that Jori has no brain activity. Her heart and lungs are still functioning because she's on life support, but she is brain dead."

AJ continued to stare at the grim-faced doctor, his words sinking in slowly. "She's dead."

“Yes. The trauma to her brain was too severe. As soon as we take her off life support, her other organs will shut down.”

“So she’s still... alive? For now?”

The doctor hesitated, then nodded. “Clinically, yes, but only because she’s on a ventilator that’s forcing her to breathe. I’m very sorry, Mr. McLean, but there is no chance of her recovering from this.”

AJ swallowed hard. “So, what, are you just waiting for my permission to turn off the life support or something?”

“Yes.” The doctor then cleared his throat, suggesting he had more to say. “I also wanted to ask you about organ donation.”

AJ felt his lip curl in disgust. “Organ donation,” he repeated.

“Yes. Do you know if Jori wanted to be an organ donor? She was brought in without identification, but she may have signed the back of her driver’s license?”

AJ could only picture the front of Jori’s license. Most people look terrible in their DMV photographs, but Jori looked beautiful. Her red hair was radiant, hanging straight and long over her shoulders. Her blue eyes stood out vividly against the backdrop. He couldn’t remember ever having wanted to turn that picture around to see the back side, and so he shook his head. “Sorry, I don’t know.”

“That’s alright. You know Jori. Think about the kind of person she was. Would she have wanted to save other people’s lives, if she could?”

AJ could sense the powers of persuasion at work, but he didn’t need to be pandered to. “Yeah, she’d probably want to do it,” he said. “Go ahead. Take her organs.”

Dr. Edison looked surprised that he had agreed so quickly. “I’ll send our transplant coordinator in to see you. She’ll have some paperwork for you to sign. Thank you for gift, Mr. McLean, and again, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Wait,” said AJ, as the doctor stood up. “You said Jori was still on life support. Can I see her first, before...?” He trailed off, hoping the doctor would understand.

Dr. Edison nodded. “Of course. Come with me.”

He led AJ to a small room where the fluorescent lighting had been dimmed. A nurse stood next to the bed in the center of the room, writing something on a clipboard. Dr. Edison cleared his throat again, and she looked up. “Mind giving Mr. McLean a few minutes alone with his fiancée?”

“Of course not.” The nurse took the clipboard and hurried out, giving AJ a sympathetic sort of smile as she passed by.

“Take all the time you need,” said the doctor, gesturing toward the bed, which was surrounded by monitors and machines. “I know it’s a lot to take in. When you’re ready, we’ll take Jori to surgery to harvest her organs, and afterwards, she’ll be left looking the same – you won’t even be able to tell.”

AJ nodded and said nothing. He didn’t want to think about it. He didn’t want to think about telling Jori’s family or planning her funeral. He didn’t want to think about the future at all. Instead, he focused on the present, on that moment, on saying goodbye to the woman he had loved. The woman he had killed.

“I’m sorry, Jori,” he whispered, once the doctor had gone, occupying the spot where the nurse had stood. He looked down at Jori’s body on the bed. He couldn’t hold her the way he had held Lucy. She was trapped inside a tangle of tubes and wires, snaking out from her mouth, her arms, and the neck of her hospital gown. But like Lucy, she looked different in death. Her face was discolored with bruises and distorted by swelling. And although her chest rose and fell steadily with the hiss of ventilator forcing air into her lungs, she was otherwise lifeless and still. The spark inside her that had made her the flame-haired firecracker he’d fallen in love with that day at the tattoo parlor had been extinguished.

He moved to the foot of the bed, where there was not so much equipment, and lifted the covers to expose her right leg. He wrapped his hand around her right ankle, running his thumb over the black outline of a dove he had tattooed there. “I hope you’re at peace now,” he said and bent down to kiss the dove. “I can’t forgive you for what you did... but I’ll never stop loving you.”

He gave her foot a squeeze and then released it, forcing himself to turn and walk away. He hesitated once in the doorway, where he could still hear the hiss of the ventilator and the blip of the monitor that measured each beat of Jori’s heart. But he didn’t allow himself to look back. The body on the bed wasn’t his Jori anymore, and the organs inside it, being kept alive by the machines, belonged to someone else.

Brian

Brian was in bed when Jori Wilder was declared brain dead. Becci had just left for work, dropping Calhan off at his mother’s house on her way. Facing another long day alone, Brian drifted back to sleep.

The call came two hours later.

He heard it through the fog of sleep, but by the time he had fought through the tangle of tubing that wound its way from the oxygen tank at his bedside to the canula in his nose and picked up the phone, there was nothing but a dial tone on the other end of the line.

That was when the pager went off.

He called the hospital back and talked to the transplant nurse. Then he called Becci at school.

“Guess what, Beccs. The pager. It went off.”

She rushed home to pick him up, and they raced to the hospital.

As his donor was being prepped for surgery, Brian was put through a battery of tests to make sure he was a match. He knew that others had been called, too, so it came as a surprise when the cardiologist himself swept into the room and announced, “It’s a go, Mr. Littrell. The donor heart looks good. It’s being flown down from Ohio on a helicopter as we speak, and you’ve checked out as the perfect candidate to receive it.”

“Really?” Brian asked, unable to contain his astonishment. His own sick heart, seeming to sense that its beats were numbered, started hammering hard.

The rhythm on his heart monitor made Dr. Robert frown. “Really,” he said, “and not a moment too soon.”

Brian nodded in agreement, taking a deep drag of oxygen. “So what happens now?”

“In a few minutes, you’ll be transported to pre-op and prepped for surgery. The heart should be here in an hour or so, and I’d like you to be on the table when it arrives. But rest assured, we won’t remove your old heart until the new one’s in the room.” Dr. Robert smiled, and Brian forced himself to smile back. His poor heart was pounding so hard, he almost felt sorry for it. But it would be a relief to wake up with a strong new heart inside of him, one that would allow him to go on with his life.

That was what he kept telling himself as a pair of nurses prepped him for surgery and wheeled him toward the operating room. *When you wake up, it’ll all be over.*

“I love you,” Becci whispered, her warm breath caressing his ear as she bent down to hug him goodbye.

“Love you too,” he murmured back. “See ya in a few hours.”

“See you soon,” she echoed as she straightened up again. He could see that her eyes were full of tears again, and her chin was quivering with the effort not to let them fall. She had been his constant companion and caretaker for the duration of the long wait, and it all came down to this moment. Struck by his love for her, he flashed her a wide grin, which she returned, tearfully.

It was that last image of her that he held in his mind as the two nurses wheeled him away. In the operating room, when the anesthesiologist placed an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose and instructed him to breathe deeply and count back from ten, Brian closed his eyes against the brightness of the lights overhead and pictured his wife's bright smile instead, as he counted himself into darkness.

But in the midst of the darkness, there was light.

At first, it was just a pinprick in the distance, like the glimmer of sunlight at the end of a tunnel. But it grew nearer, the round halo of light expanding outward, filling his vision. It was bright, almost blinding. It fought the darkness, chasing it away, and at first, he was grateful. But the light kept coming, so close it threatened to swallow him up. He couldn't see anything, and as the light surrounded him, his feeling of comfort turned to fear.

He was going to die.

The thought crossed his mind a split second before he felt a crushing blow, and the light faded to impenetrable dark.

In the operating room, Dr. Robert pulled the defibrillator paddles away from the new heart in Brian's chest and smiled, as he watched its weak, random twitches strengthen into vigorous, pulsing beats.

Just six months later, in a trauma room one floor below, a different team of doctors looked down into the cracked chest of their patient and frowned, as they watched the weak, random twitches of his ravaged heart slow to a stop. "The knife's out; let's defibrillate," said one. "Charge the internal paddles to twenty."

"Too late - asystole," said another. "Starting internal massage."

Looking down on his own body from some unearthly vantage point above, Brian watched the doctor take the donor heart in her hands and squeeze it, forcing it to contract. He could see the blood pouring from the hole in the heart, but he felt no pain or fear, no revulsion or sadness, just an odd sort of detachment.

"Look at this - his left ventricle's shredded. We're not gonna be able to repair this."

"Even if we could, we wouldn't get him back - he's been down too long."

One of the doctors sighed. "What a way to go."

The other shook his head. "What a waste."

Brian looked up, and where there should have been ceiling, there was only light - an endless, open sky of white light, more brilliant than the sun. It filled his vision, but it

didn't hurt his eyes; in fact, he no longer needed to blink. He was drawn to the light, like a moth to a flame, and felt himself drifting toward it. As the light surrounded him, the scene below him disappeared in darkness.

Becci

Becci had spent too much time sitting in waiting rooms.

She would never forget the six-hour wait she'd endured while Brian underwent his heart transplant. But the long, nervous wait had been worth the relief she'd felt when Dr. Robert had come to tell her, "Brian sailed through the transplant with flying colors. The new heart's in and functioning fine. He has a long road to recovery ahead of him, but he's looking better already, and after a few days, I'm sure he'll be feeling better, too."

Worse yet was the wait in the emergency room, as the doctors and nurses scrambled to save her husband from succumbing to the stab wound in his heart. The wait wasn't nearly as long, though it felt that way, and when it was over, there was no relief.

"Mrs. Littrell?"

Becci looked up at the woman in scrubs who had addressed her. Her scrubs were spotlessly clean, but Becci noticed a spatter of red on her shoes, which made her suspect the doctor had changed clothes before coming to talk to her. The realization gave her a sinking feeling in her stomach. "Yes?" she asked, her voice an octave higher than usual as she stood up shakily.

The doctor extended her hand, and Becci noticed that her nails were scrubbed clean as well. "I'm Dr. Maxwell, the trauma surgeon. I operated on your husband."

Becci gripped her hand weakly. "How is he?"

"Let's sit down," said Dr. Maxwell, still holding Becci's hand. She sank into the seat next to Becci's, and Becci reluctantly dropped back down beside her. "The stab wound in Brian's chest was very severe. The knife went into the left ventricle of his heart. As blood leaked into the sac surrounding his heart, it put too much pressure on his heart and stopped it from beating. Unfortunately, we weren't able to repair the damage in time. I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, Mrs. Littrell, but your husband has died."

In that instant, Becci felt as if someone had plunged a knife through her own heart, tearing a hole that could never be patched. But somehow, her heart kept beating. Somehow, life went on.

Six months later, she found herself standing in a much different waiting room, with butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

“Rebecca Littrell?”

She stepped forward to meet the officer who had called her name. He checked the visitor’s badge she’d received in exchange for filling out a form.

“Follow me.”

He led her out of the reception area and through a security checkpoint that reminded her of an airport. She only wished she were flying somewhere, anywhere but here.

Once she had cleared the metal detector, she followed the officer into a large room divided in half by a wall of thick, plexiglass windows. There were counters and a row of stools on either side of the glass. Narrow dividers extended from the wall, forming small booths, and every booth had a phone installed on both sides. Becci noticed that everything was firmly fixed to either the wall or floor. To her, it was like seeing the set from a movie; she had never visited a prison before.

“You sit here,” said the corrections officer, escorting her to a stool at the end of the row. “They’re about to bring him in. When you’re ready to talk, just pick up the phone.”

Becci nodded. “Thanks,” she replied faintly, reconsidering her decision to come. How could she face this man? What would she say? It seemed foolish, but she was desperate for answers. He was the only one left who might understand, who might be able to make her understand, too.

She had only seen AJ McLean on her TV screen, never in real life, but she recognized him when she saw him being led into the room by another officer. His tattoos were covered by the long sleeves of his prison jumpsuit, and his thinning hair was buzzed short, but his eyes looked the same as they did in photographs. Dark. Haunted. They narrowed when they spotted her, and she realized that although she recognized him, he had no way of knowing her.

Once he was seated across from her, he picked up the phone on his side of the glass, and she picked up hers. “Who are you?” he asked as a greeting, but his tone of voice wasn’t challenging, merely curious.

She swallowed hard and attempted a smile. It was strange speaking to someone on the phone and facing them at the same time. “My name is Becci Littrell. I’m Brian Littrell’s widow.” She paused, unsure if he would recognize the name, then added, “You know, the man who got-?”

“Who got my girlfriend’s heart,” he finished. “I remember. He came to see me once.” AJ frowned. “You said ‘widow.’ He’s dead?”

Becci felt the now familiar stabbing sensation in her heart, but she forced herself to nod. “He died in May. The police think it was suicide... that he stabbed himself in the heart.”

Jori's heart, she thought. She could tell by the look in AJ's eyes that he was thinking the same thing.

"Holy shit, are you serious? Why would he do something like that?"

Becci met his eyes. "That's what I want to know."

AJ appeared so taken aback, he literally leaned back on his stool. "You think *I* know? You think I had something to do with it? I've been incarcerated since April."

"I don't know what to think." Becci shook her head, staring down at the counter in front of her. "All I know is that something changed in him after his transplant. He was never quite the same after that. He started having nightmares... it was like he was haunted by Jori. That's why he went to see you that day." She looked back up at AJ. "He was looking for answers. I guess I'm just looking for the same thing."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't have any answers."

Becci nodded and lowered her head, so he wouldn't see the tears that had sprung to her eyes. She had spent six months seeking an explanation, trying to understand what could have driven her husband to take his own life. Now her last hope had proven futile.

"I'm sorry for your loss," AJ added, and Becci glanced up. He was looking at her through the glass with sympathy. "It's hard to understand why shit happens to good people. Maybe we aren't meant to understand. In the end, I guess some things just defy explanation."

But Becci Littrell would spend the rest of her life waiting... waiting for an explanation that would never come.

The End