

# **“HIDDEN TREASURES”**

**By Derek Rudolph Henig**

## **chapter 1**

# **LETTER FROM THE BEYOND**

It was one of those moments where the desire to not believe what was happening, was confronted by stark reality and proof to the contrary. Katie didn't want to believe it was happening, even if they'd known for over a year that this day was inevitable—and the scene before her was clear proof of that. There was a steady mist of rain in the air which seemed to find its way around all the umbrellas and left Katie's hair slightly damp. The dyed streak of red in her otherwise dark hair clung to her cheek and accidentally complimented the scene before her as another person stepped forward to place a rose on her mother's casket. Her father's arm rested gently around her shoulder as they moved forward to place their own roses. Katie's black converse sneakers squished in the damp ground with each step. She wore a black dress under her raincoat, but she wouldn't compromise on the shoes. Katie didn't like dress shoes and knew her mother wouldn't have minded.

Words were said by a priest, which Katie didn't absorb, and then she was suddenly shaking hands, and hugging family and friends.

"I'm so sorry, Katie," her best friend Dean said as he gave her a hug, followed by similar words and hugs from Dean's parents.

The crowd eventually thinned until only one woman remained. Katie recognized her, but was surprised to see her there. One of the nurses that took care of her mother. After a few months in the hospital, they'd become very familiar with the doctors and nurses.

"Hi, Ben, Katie," Ali said, looking to Katie's father and then down to her. "I'm so sorry for your loss." Then her eyes locked onto Katie's. "Your mother was very special and I was lucky to have grown close to her at the end. I know you don't know me well, but here's my number," Ali handed a piece of paper to Ben. "Anything you two need, please don't hesitate to ask. Anything at all, I'd be happy to help."

"Thank you, Ali," Ben said, as he took the number and slipped it into his pocket. "We appreciate that."

And then, they were alone. Father and daughter in the misting rain. There would be a small gathering at a restaurant to follow, but Katie just wanted to go home. Not because it was Christmas Eve, but because she just wanted to be alone with her father. She didn't get that wish until after it was dark outside, but as soon as she stepped inside, Katie felt relief. The only decoration in the house was a tree full of bright lights and ornaments. Katie didn't look at it. She kicked off her sneakers and made her way into the kitchen to sit at the island. Her father followed closely behind her carrying the mail as well as two trays of food from the restaurant. He plopped the food on the island, then the mail, and then emptied his pockets beside that. Katie saw the paper with Ali's number on it and, for no reason in particular, picked it up and studied it.

"Katie," Ben said, and the tone of his voice made Katie's eyes widen in worry and she dropped the piece of paper from her hands. "It's a letter from... your mother I think."

"From mom?" Katie said, not sure she was understanding, emotions spilling into her eyes.

"It's for you—here—look at the handwriting," he said, handing her the letter.

Katie reached out with a tentative hand, grasping the letter like it was extremely fragile. It was, as her father said, clearly her mother's handwriting. All it said was, "To my Katie." Katie looked up to her father who made a face that said, "*Don't look at me?*" Then, she turned it over and opened it carefully. She pulled out two pieces of paper. Katie opened the first one that was just a regular piece of lined paper. She immediately recognized her mother's handwriting and began to read it aloud.

*My Daughter;*

*There is a treasure hidden, that only I know about.*

*I've left you a series of clues for you to figure out.*

*It will be quite challenging.*

*Requires all your cunning;*

*All your will power, stamina, and all you can imagine.*

*Don't seek help and accept none.*

*I entrust this to you alone.*

*With all my love,*  
*Mom*

Katie looked up to her father and his mouth was open in clear surprise and he shook his head and smiled.

“Only your mother,” Ben said.

Katie’s heart was racing now as she put the letter down and opened the second piece of paper. It was a thicker card-stock paper. When she opened it, her mind went into overdrive with questions and possibilities. It looked like a treasure map from a movie. There was a Circle, and then a curving dashed line traced a path down and up to a Triangle, and then another curving dashed line twisted over and down to a Rectangle. Finally, the dashed line went from the Rectangle to a large X. Beside the Circle, Triangle, and Rectangle were three different riddles also clearly written by her mother’s hand. Katie looked back up to her father again. *Was this some weird joke?* Again, Ben’s face showed that he was as shocked and surprised as Katie was.

“What could it be?” Katie said.

“Only one way to find out,” he answered.

## chapter 2

# THE TRIANGLE & THE RECTANGLE

“Let’s go!” Ben called from downstairs.

“Two minutes!” Katie called back as she continued dashing around her room.

She was was in hot pursuit of a shirt, a particular shirt. The long sleeve crimson shirt that said, “Linkin Park” on it. All her dresser drawers were open, even the ones where there was no chance the shirt would be. Katie was moving through her closet now like a hurricane frantically moving things aside and back again.

“Yes!” she exclaimed in triumph when she finally saw it. Neatly folded under a sweatshirt, Katie reached up, standing on her toes, pulling the shirt and the sweatshirt down. The sweatshirt thumped onto the closet floor, which she ignored, as she turned away from the closet and slipped the Linkin Park shirt on.

“That’s two minutes!” Ben called again.

“Coming now!” She called back, but before she made for the door, Katie moved towards the opposite side of her room where a few items were tacked up on the wall.

Katie glanced over her mother’s letter, and over the map with the three riddles. There was also a piece of paper with a string of numbers tacked next to the Circle on the map. She’d cracked that part of the riddle on Christmas morning. Grateful for her father allowing them to spend the day together, Katie was able to dive into the first riddle. Next to the Circle on the map, it read:

*If you forget, you may blame me.*

*But all your effort will never tame me.*

*You can not save me, only spend me.*

*Life is much sweeter when you savor me.*

Katie figured it out before lunchtime that morning and she felt a surge of pride in herself. The riddle talked about Time, and then paired with a circle, it had to be a clock, or a watch face.

A circle that told time! She then ran around the house looking behind, and even inside, any clock she could find. Taped behind the largest clock in the living room, was a strip of paper with twelve numbers written in her mother's handwriting. She showed them to her father, who put his hands in the air.

"I'm not supposed to help you," he said, and then leaned a little closer to the paper unable to help his curiosity. "But... I honestly have no idea."

Katie could tell there was no lie in his face.

Now, 3 months later, much of that initial pride was gone as the other two riddles remained unsolved. Katie stared at them, even though she had them both memorized at that point. It was just something she felt she had to do every morning. The one next to the triangle read:

*I'm simply a tool; a means to an end.  
On my own I'm useless,  
But if used correctly, I help make music.  
I'm not necessary, but a preference,  
I'm for both beginners and the experts  
For your mother or for Jimi Hendrix*

No new surge of insight hit Katie, so she moved her glance to the riddle next to the rectangle on the map:

*It's rare that you would look at me,  
And even if you do, you'll always see more than me.  
I'm a doorway of sorts, and a barrier all at once.  
Your mother has a favorite in the house.  
Find me, and look above.*

Again, no new surge of insight filled Katie. Another call came from her father downstairs, and Katie went running out of her room and down the steps. Ben gave her an impatient look as he handed Katie her jacket. She smiled, shrugged her shoulders, grabbed the jacket, her backpack and violin by the door, and then jogged to the car. Once at the school, Katie dropped her violin at her locker, and then went to meet Dean by his locker as was their usual routine. Together, they started towards their first class.

“Anything to report on your mom’s mystery map?” Dean said.

“Nope,” Katie said.

Dean started their walk to class the same way, everyday, since they returned to school from the break. It was like checking the weather.

“I still don’t see why you can’t ask your dad for help,” Dean said.

“My mom’s instructions said to not seek help or accept any,” Katie said, for what must have been the tenth time that week alone. “I just can’t do it.”

“Alright, alright. Want to go check out a movie this weekend?”

“Sure,” Katie said, a little absent minded as her focus shifted.

Hannah, one of the most popular girls in 8th grade, was waiting outside a different classroom with her friends as Katie and Dean walked passed. Katie agreed to Dean’s movie suggestion as she glanced over towards Hannah and away, and back again. Hannah had long dirty blonde hair that she had braided and then draped over her right shoulder. Hannah’s blue eyes turned and locked onto Katie’s for a split second before Katie turned away. When they passed by Hannah and the group she was talking to, Katie looked back to Dean.

“What movie do you wanna see?” she said.

“Seriously?” Dean said laughing. “You just agreed to go see Spider Man.”

“Oh, yea, sorry. That sounds good to me.”

It was Algebra, then US History, and then Band. That was her favorite part of the day. Getting to play her violin. Katie played with great focus and skill. She moved through the notes on the pages before her, and watched their teacher keep the rhythm for them all. They would be called to stop every so often and Mr. Polins would impart some instruction before continuing. Nearing the end of the class, during one of those moments of pause, Katie’s eyes wandered to the

boy across the room and two seats back. Zack played guitar in the band. There was nothing new to cause the flurry of inspiration, but it just began to click. The triangle from the map.

Katie closed her eyes and thought of the riddle again:

*I'm simply a tool; a means to an end.*

*On my own I'm useless,*

*But if used correctly, I help make music.*

That part she understood. It wasn't an instrument, but some tool that helped create music. She'd thought of a record player, and all sort of things, but nothing that resembled the shape of a triangle, like the circle resembled a clock. She continued the riddle.

*I'm not necessary, but a preference,*

*I'm for both beginners and the experts;*

*For your mother or for Jimi Hendrix.*

Katie didn't know why she didn't see it before, but the last line. She thought it was just a generic statement about amateur's versus experts, but it must have been to tell her which instrument to focus on. Her mother and Jimi Hendrix both played the guitar. That was their main instrument. And the tool they all use, not as a necessity, but as a preference—useless on its own—was a guitar pick! A guitar pick was just an upside down triangle! Katie's head was spinning and she missed the cue to begin playing again. Mr. Polins called out to her and she came back to the reality before her and quickly moved her bow over the strings of her violin.

The bell rang a minute later, and Katie immediately stopped playing and packed up her violin, dashing from the room towards the cafeteria to tell Dean. The rest of the day was almost excruciating. Katie had no other interest in her mind except to get home. That of course made everything move in slow motion. As was the routine, when the final bell rang out, she had to rely on the bus to get home since her Father could only drive her to school in the mornings. Something he started doing since her mother passed. Every stop the bus made was a punch to the



chest. Dean wanted to go with her, but Katie was adamant about accepting no help per her mother's instructions.

"Alright, text me what you find at least," Dean had said when she told him she had to do it alone. "I may not be as anxious as you are to figure this out, but I'm pretty close!"

When her bus stop approached, Katie was out of her seat and walking towards the front of the bus, her violin in tow. She ignored the scolding glance of her bus driver for being out of her seat before the bus was stopped and jumped through the open doors, ran two houses down, and after two attempts finally got her key in the slot and she was inside. Backpack thrown to the side, violin placed next to it, and shoes kicked off, Katie was off to the living room. Afternoon sunlight peaked through the blinds and shone a light upon her mother's guitar in the corner beside her favorite chair.

Katie moved towards it slowly, taking in every detail around the guitar so as not to miss a thing. The chair in the corner was a simple wooden chair, with no armrests, and a light blue cushion on the seat. The Martin guitar was well used, and the stain of the wood was faded all over. Tucked in the strings was a guitar pick. Katie pulled it out from between the strings and turned it over. There was nothing special there. Just the brand name, "Dunlop," and the corresponding logo of a turtle. Katie's lips pursed in disappointment and thought. She was expecting something like the string of numbers she found behind the large clock.

Inspiration poured back into Katie as she dropped to her knees in front of a small wicker basket with a lid that sat behind the guitar. She knew her mother kept all her extra strings and other musical supplies there. Katie fumbled around inside and then she found a smaller container, gave it a shake and got the sound she hoped for. Plastic picks shaking against the small wood container.

Inside the container were about 20 guitar picks—all identical. All green Dunlops with the turtle logo on them. Katie's mouth contorted again in thought, then dumped the entire contents onto the floor and looked at each pick in turn. Then, she poured over the small wooden container itself looking for a hidden message of any kind. Nothing.

Katie slumped back against the tv stand and stared up at the ceiling trying to understand what her mother was trying to accomplish with all this. *Was it supposed to be this hard?*

Frustration was building inside. Why not just tell her about this treasure, instead of sending her on this wild goose chase? It didn't make any sense to her. What if she never figured it out? What if she failed? Would her mother really leave it all to chance like this? Katie got up off the floor, leaving the guitar picks on the ground, and went into the kitchen to get a glass of water.

"Dunlop, dunlop, dunlop," Katie said, repeating the brand of the guitar pick over and over again. "Dunlop," she said for the twentieth time but now with an idea behind the word. Katie had seen her mother play a thousand times, and the picks weren't always green. Inspecting the guitar picks further in the living room, they all looked brand new. "Dunlop," she said again to herself as if it meant something more now. Katie pulled out her phone to type in the name then paused. She added the name of her town and then hit enter.

"Wylder & Dunlop Bank!" Katie exclaimed and spun around to face the chair as if to tell her mother that she figured it out. She stared at the empty space, but she smiled anyway. She figured it out. The second clue!

When her father came home, Katie revealed the news and they immediately drove to the bank together. Katie had the string of numbers, probably an account number, typed into a note on her phone. When they were able to speak to someone, the bank teller quickly revealed that the account in question was a safety deposit box and required a key.

"The third clue," Katie muttered to herself.

Dinner that night was a quiet one, as Katie's mind buzzed with ideas and the desire to solve the last and final clue. Repeating the riddle in her head over and over.

*It's rare that you would look at me,  
And even if you do, you'll always see more than me  
I'm a doorway of sorts, and a barrier all at once.  
Your mother has a favorite in the house.  
Find me, and look above.*

Without realizing it, Ben got up from the table and removed her empty plate from in front of her. Katie looked up after a few seconds and her father was smiling down at her.

“I know it’s Friday, but don’t stay up too late,” he said, clearly understanding what Katie needed to do. She needed to solve this thing. She gave her dad a quick smile and he gave her a hug before she dashed away and up to her room.

Katie stared at the riddle tacked onto the wall in her room and then paced. After a while of that she laid on her bed staring up at the ceiling, the riddle playing on repeat in her mind. The night was quickly fading into day as Katie stared out the window to watch the sky turn lighter and lighter and then—she had it. It all fit, and she knew where to search too. She knew which one was her mother’s favorite in the house. Katie could hear her mom saying it in passing conversation now as if she were standing beside her.

When her father came downstairs for his morning coffee an hour later, Katie was in the kitchen waiting. Tired from a night of no sleep, but also wide awake with excitement, she smiled at her father and held up a small gold key.

“Window!” Katie explained. “You don’t look at windows, but through them most of the time, and if you tried to look at it, you’ll still see through it. It’s a doorway for light, and a barrier to wind and the outside in general. Mom’s favorite window, the one in the kitchen that overlooks the backyard. I remember her saying that she loved watching me play in the yard from there. This,” she held up the key. “was sitting right on top of the molding of the window! That’s everything. The account number, the bank, and the key!”

“I’m impressed,” Ben said, stifling back a yawn.

“Well, can we go?” Katie said.

Ben looked at the time, “Bank opens in thirty minutes... let me have some coffee and then we can go.”

“Yes!” Katie said, and she ran from the kitchen to go get dressed.

## **chapter 3**

### **THE BANK**

“Account number,” said a tall and very skinny man. A golden name tag told Katie that his name was George.

“9051-7843-3285,” Katie read from the sheet of paper held in front of her.

“And do you have your key?” George asked, looking down at Katie over his long narrow nose.

“I do,” she said.

“Follow me,” George said, as he stood up from behind the counter.

He led Katie and Ben to a room and left them there while he went to retrieve the safety deposit box. Katie felt anxious, and nervous. It had been months since her mother passed, and months to work out the three clues. What could her mother have left for her?

“Are you ok?” Ben asked, and Katie looked up from staring at her hands.

“I’m nervous,” Katie confessed and her father took her hand.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Ben said, and Katie felt some of the tension fall away.

Then, George came back into the small, yet cozy room, carrying a long metal container. George placed it on the table in front of them.

“The room is yours as long as you need it,” George said, and then he left.

Whatever tension and anxiety that left Katie a moment ago, was back in full swing. Her heart raced as she pulled the small gold key from her pocket. Ben moved the metal container closer to Katie and she inserted the key and turned it. The room was so silent, Katie hardly even breathing, that when the lock clicked open, it seemed to echo. She turned and gave one glance over to her father, who nodded back in encouragement, then she threw the lid open like ripping off a bandaid.

All Katie’s expectations, ideas, and thoughts of what would be in this box; all the dreams she’d had over the passed few months, were shattered. Nothing glinted or glittered up at her. No shiny objects, no ancient tomes, no forgotten family heirlooms. Inside were just two plain envelopes, like the one she opened on Christmas Eve. One letter had a big number one on it, and

the other a big number two. Katie forgot all about her father being there as she tore open the first envelope and pulled out a hand written letter from her mother. Katie's heart skipped a beat and her eyes began to fill with tears at the sight of her mother's handwriting. Then, taking a deep breath, mustering her strength, she read.

*My darling Katie,*

*Well done! I'm sure you're wondering what this whole adventure has been for? What your treasure is? I know this all might seem very strange, but I've had over a year to consider my life and what I want to leave behind. What I struggled with the most with my diagnosis was the time I would miss with you. If we had decades more together, I would have been there to hear your struggles, offer you any wisdom I have in me, and in general, just be there for you to show you how much you're loved. Luckily, I know your father is more than up for the task. That leaves me content. However, there are just a few things I'd like you to take away from me. Yet, if you just read it in a letter, it wouldn't have the same effect. So, I set up this little treasure hunt, and your first reward is this:*

*If you did what I asked, and accepted no help, and asked for none, you've arrived here through your own effort and resilience. I want you to remember that. I want you to remember that you have everything you need in life... inside of you. Anything you ever need to learn, you can do it. Anything you want to accomplish, you have what it takes. Anytime you fall, you have the strength to get back up and move on. It's great to accept help in life, and to ask for it, but it's most important to first know that you have everything you need... help just makes it go faster. Now you've experienced it. I hope the riddles were challenging, and it took a great effort for you to figure them out. The harder it was, the better this reward is. The understanding that you have what it takes to accomplish anything you set your heart to.*

*I love you so much Katie. Now, and always,*

*Mom*

Katie finished reading the letter, tears falling down her cheek and then she read it again. After the third time, she looked up to her father who immediately wiped a tear from her face. Katie handed him the letter to read and she could see him fighting back the tears as well.

“Wow,” Ben said, wiping a tear from his own eye as he handed the letter back to Katie. “She’s right you know.”

Katie nodded her head, vowing in her mind to really believe it of herself.

“Ready to open the second one?” Ben asked.

“Yea,” Katie replied and she tore it open.

The paper in this envelope was thicker, and plain white—the same as the one that the first map of riddles was drawn on. Written in her mother’s scrawling handwriting was another riddle.

*At 3, on a school day, you must be here*

*Inside the tree I’m waiting.*

*Which one and where?*

*An Island apart,*

*Sitting alone and bare,*

*A single hole hides your prize with Care.*

“Looks like the adventure continues,” Ben said, but Katie didn’t acknowledge him. She was engrossed in the new riddle.

There were two things she noted right away, and that’s that the words Island and Care were both capitalized when they shouldn’t be. Katie knew there must be some significance to that. She felt her father’s hand on her shoulder suddenly, and Katie looked up startled a little. She realized she had no idea how long she’d been staring at the riddle.

“Come on, you can work on it at home,” Ben said. “unless you want to go out for an early lunch first?” Ben read the look on his daughter’s face. “Ok, I’ll make some sandwiches at the house.”

Katie smiled up at her father and then placed both the letter and the new riddle back inside their envelopes, and into her jacket pocket.

“Ready,” she said.

## chapter 4

# THE SECOND HUNT

“Wow, that’s really awesome, Katie,” Dean said, handing the letter back to her.

The cafeteria of the school was full and loud, which made their conversation somehow feel private. Katie was able to catch Dean up to speed and even let him read her mother’s letter.

“Do I get to see the next riddle?” Dean asked.

“Sure,” Katie said, and passed the riddle over to Dean who began to mumble the riddle out loud:

*At 3, on a school day, you must be here*

*Inside the tree I’m waiting*

*Which one and where?*

*An Island apart*

*Sitting alone and bare*

*A single hole hides your prize with Care*

While he read, Katie’s eyes wandered around the cafeteria and eventually found the popular table where Hannah sat. Her hair braided and over her shoulder, laughing with her friends.

“Any idea what it all means?” Dean asked, waving the riddle in his hand and bringing Katie’s focus back to their lonely table.

“I know exactly what it means,” she said, “or at least what I need to do.”

“Yea?” Dean answered, sounding surprised. “That was fast.”

“It wasn’t as hard as the first few,” Katie said with a wave of her hand, and then went into explaining. “The first thing I noticed was that Island and Care were capitalized. So, I just googled Island Care and the first result is a park named Carrie’s Island Park on the other side of town.”

“Which one’s that?”



“You know, the one with the trees,” Katie joked and Dean rolled his eyes. Katie continued. “It’s the one with all the baseball fields and tennis courts.”

“Ahhh,” Dean voiced in understanding. “So, are you going today?”

“I can’t,” Katie said, happy she could finally share her frustration with her friend. “It’s too far to bike, and My Dad can’t take me at 3 o’clock when I’m supposed to be there. He’s got work.”

“I’d say my mom or something,” Dean added. “but same thing. Uber?”

“My Dad would kill me if I did that. He said he’ll be able to get out early next week, but there’s just too much going on this week to take off. So, I just have to wait.”

“Well, at least it’s a week, and not months.”

“Good point,” Katie said.

. . .

When she got home, Katie went straight to her room. A habit she’d developed since her mom left her the first riddles and treasure map. Katie went up and stood before the wall in her bedroom and she re-tacked the new letter from her mom, and the second riddle onto the wall amongst the first riddle and treasure map. She was turning away from it all to go lie down on her bed and take a nap when one of the pieces of paper on the wall made her pause.

“Ali...” Katie said.

It had been months since Ali approached them at the funeral, and gave her number to her father and offered to help if they needed anything. Katie had kept the number not really with any intention to use it, but now it presented the perfect solution. Katie needed a ride, and maybe Ali could provide it. Katie sent her a text message and then went to her bed, clutching her phone to her chest waiting a reply.

During eating dinner with her father, Katie’s phone finally called out with a loud, *ping!*

“What the?” Ben said, through a mouthful of food.

Katie had just stood up from the table, dropping her fork in the process which clanged against her plate and shot bits of broccoli onto the table. She didn’t notice though as she was

already three steps towards the kitchen where her phone rested on the island. “What’s goin’ on?” Her father called after her.

“Yes!” was the only reply Ben heard as Katie came back into the small dining area still staring at her phone.

“What’s going on?” Ben repeated.

“Sorry Dad,” Katie said and then looked up to see the scene she left behind. “Oh, I’ll clean that up in a second, listen... I found someone to give me a ride to that park tomorrow if it’s alright with you?”

“Who?” Ben’s eyebrows furrowed in suspicion.

“Do you remember Ali? The nurse who came to mom’s funeral. I kept her number and she just replied that she can take me, but she just wants to hear from you that it’s ok.”

Katie paused from her excitement and tried to read her father’s expression as he sat in thought. Then, she added, “I would prefer to go with you, of course, but I just don’t want to wait.”

“Ok, fine, let me talk to Ali,” he said holding out his hand and he dialed Ali’s number from Katie’s phone.

After a short conversation, it was all set. Ali would pick her up after school tomorrow, and they would explore this park together. Katie was so excited now that she couldn’t eat anymore. She cleaned up her scattering of broccoli and then helped her father clean up the kitchen. Katie then texted Dean the exciting news, who answered with a dozen wild emojis.

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“Hop in,” Ali called through the window of a bright yellow Volkswagen beetle. Katie did just that with a nervous smile on her face. “Are you ready?”

“Yea,” Katie said, and Ali drove away from the school.

Ali was dressed in jeans and a sweater, her hair a curly light brown, hung loosely down her back.

“How’ve you been, Katie?” Ali asked, with a quick glance over.

“Been alright,” she said with a shrug. “Miss mom a lot, but with this whole treasure hunt thing, I still feel like she’s here.”

“It’s pretty incredible that your mom was able to do all this. Hiding letters in trees!”

“Yea, not really sure how she did it, or when she did it, but I know she had some help.”

“What makes you say that?” Ali asked.

“The first letter had no postage on it, and no return address. It had to have been hand delivered, and I don’t think my mom was up for that task at the time.”

The car went silent, and then Ali let out a short laugh.

“Sorry,” Katie said. “I tend to have a slightly morbid sense of humor.”

Ali pulled up to a stop sign, and then leaned over towards Katie, “so do I,” she said with a wink. Then, started driving again. “Sort of comes with the job I guess. You have to be able to joke about things. If you can’t, everything becomes too serious, and life will destroy you. Your mom knew how to joke around. I swear, she was one of the funniest people I’ve ever known.”

Katie didn’t know what to say, but just smiled back.

“If I’m talking too much just tell me, I know I can go on and on.”

“No, I like hearing about my mom from other people. It’s nice.”

Ali continued telling stories to Katie about her mom. Pranks they played together on some of the other nurses, and other more serious conversations about life in general. Ali talked and Katie listened all the way to the park.

“Now what do we do?” Ali asked.

“I’m looking for something, but if it’s ok, I’d like to look on my own. My mom’s instructions said to not accept help. I’m sure getting a ride to the park is ok, but I think I’m supposed to figure these out for myself.”

“Say no more!” Ali said. “I’ll just follow your lead and I won’t say a thing.”

Katie hopped out of the yellow Beetle and began looking. *An Island apart, alone and bare.* Katie whispered the line of the riddle to herself as she scoured the park. *A tree standing on its own, with a hole in it.* Katie saw it pretty quickly and ran across the park, not paying attention to Ali who kept pace with her the whole way. On the opposite side of the park, sat a single tree. Everywhere else the trees seemed to be grouped, but this one stood alone. Across the street was a

row of houses, and behind the tree sat the tennis courts. When Katie studied the tree, there was indeed a hole in the side and she carefully and slowly stuck her hand inside to feel around.

She came back with another two envelopes, both together inside of a ziplock bag. Katie looked at Ali, and Ali smiled back at Katie.

“This is cool!” Ali said. “What do they say?”

Katie opened the ziplock and held the two letters before her.

“The first says, ‘Open after the Bus drives away,’” Katie read, “and the second says, ‘Open me second.’”

“Bus?” Ali asked.

“What time is it?” Katie asked and Ali brought her phone in front of her face.

“2:50,” Ali answered.

“The riddle said to be here at 3 o’clock. That must be when the bus comes. And then for whatever reason, I need to open the envelope then.”

“Then, we wait,” Ali said.

Ten minutes later, just as the time hit 3:00 on Ali’s phone, a yellow school bus pulled down the street in between the houses and the park. The bus stopped just one house down from the tree where Katie found the letter and when it pulled away Katie’s heart thumped hard and fast in her chest and she immediately ran behind the tree.

“What are we...” Ali started, but trailed off and just watched Katie who was now peering around the side of the tree to the students who just exited the bus.

Katie watched as Hannah waved goodbye to some other kids and walked up a stone path to the house where the bus just stopped. *How could it be Hannah?* Katie’s mind questioned and her heart continued to race.

“You can open your letter now, Katie,” Ali’s soft voice came, and Katie turned around. Ali put a hand on Katie’s back and she felt her breath slow a bit, although tears were beginning to pool in her eyes. “It’s ok, Katie,” Ali said. “I think you should read the letter now. Whatever you’re feeling, I’m sure your mom has a reason.”

Katie nodded, feeling reassured, and glad Ali was here. It seemed more appropriate than if her father had come instead. Katie held up the envelope and tore it open. She pulled out the letter she was expecting to find, and began to read.

*My amazing daughter,  
If I could have shared only one lesson, It would have been this one. I hope  
I showed you in life, but in case you weren't paying attention:  
Love who you are. Love yourself completely and always.  
Love yourself for where you are, who you are in this moment, and never feel like  
you need to be someone else. Love yourself, and love what, and most importantly  
in this moment... who you want. When everyone understands, and do it all the  
same when no one understands. But I promise you this, you are surrounded by  
those who love you, and will always love you no matter what. By those who see  
how amazing you are, as you are. You're beautiful and special and you are loved  
all around, and by me above. Trust me, and be yourself. There's no part of  
yourself you should ever hide.*

Katie was on her knees in the grass beside the tree, and she didn't remember dropping down. Tears fell from her face like a river, not in sadness, but in a release. A dam broken and her body melting from the inside out. Katie accepted Ali's embrace, not fully aware of her surroundings. After several minutes, Katie gained her composure and sat back on her heels. Looking up, Ali was there in front of her.

"Your mom writes a mean letter, huh?" Ali said with a smirk and Katie laughed and sniffed back hard. She was suddenly aware that she was definitely a mess, and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "Wanna talk about it?"

Katie took a deep breath, "Yes..." she started and then paused. "but I think I need to talk to my dad first."

"I'm here, whenever you want, Katie. Always."

When Katie got home, she sat in the living room waiting and mustering up her courage. It was one thing to get acceptance from her mother through that letter, but saying things out loud was a whole other story. During her waiting, she wondered how her mom even knew where Hannah lived? And then she remembered that their mom's used to work together when Katie and Hannah were in elementary school. By the time the headlight's of her father's car pierced through the living room window, Katie was pacing. Her heart racing again. The sound of her dad's car door closing. Katie wasn't sure she could stand up she was so afraid. The front door creaking open. Katie's heart was going to burst out of her any moment. Tears filling her eyes as she heard the coat closet open. Then close. Her father stepping into the living room.

"Hey Katie, how'd it..." Ben started but trailed off at the sight of the trembling Katie. "What's wrong?" He said stepping closer.

"N-nothing," Katie stammered.

"I'm here, whatever it is," he said, his hands now gently holding her arms.

"I... I just have something to tell you," Katie said.

"I promise, Katie, whatever it is, I'm here."

Katie couldn't do it. But she had to. While she had the strength of her mother's words to fuel her. Now.

"I..." she started, "I think... I'm... Gay." Katie's body tensed like a board and her eyes turned away from her father's gaze.

"Oh," her father said with a relieving release of breath. "That's great Katie. I love you, but I have one question or one thought." Katie looked at him nervously. "Do you think it, or do you know it? If you know it, my dear, own it." His smile was uplifting.

Katie straightened up, took in a deep breath and looked her father in the eyes. "I'm gay," she said without hesitation and her father pulled her into a massive bear hug.

"That's my girl," he said. "I love you so much."

Katie felt the release in her body again, like earlier in the park, but not as intensely. It was as if before she had been trying to hide the truth from herself, and had to accept herself. And now she could release knowing that she was accepted by her father, and her mother too. She was free.

## **chapter 5**

### **TEAM EFFORT**

The next day, Katie wasted no time in telling Dean everything. She met him at his locker in the morning as usual, and came right out with it. Literally. Katie had no idea the tension she was holding inside of her all of this time, but again she felt that internal release. A sense of relief. No tears this time, but just a sense of feeling immensely relaxed.

“Wow,” Dean said, “I mean, obviously that’s cool and I’m totally I don’t know... ok with it? Sorry, I don’t know what the right thing to say is... I kind of feel like saying—what’s the big deal? And I know it has to be a big deal to you, but it’s almost like you told me you want to change your hair color. You’re my friend, and I love you, you know, no matter what.”

Dean finished his rambling looking at Katie as if bracing for her to slap him across the face. She just hugged him, and Dean awkwardly returned the embrace.

“You said everything I needed to hear, Dean, Thanks,” Katie said, pulling away from the hug and looking up to him with a smile.

Dean smiled back and then chuckled to himself, “I guess this puts me in the friend-zone like nothing else, huh?”

“What?” Katie said.

“Well, since you revealed your secret, no sense in keeping mine. I’ve had a crush on you for... ever.”

Dean laughed at himself, and Katie joined in.

“Friend-zone,” Katie said, as they started walking down the hallway towards class.

“Not a bad place to be,” Dean said, giving Katie a light bump in the shoulder.

...

After school, Katie met Ali again like the day before. She texted her after speaking to her dad. Ali was there with her when she first read the letter and Katie felt like she wanted to explain things to her as well. Katie explained over a cup of coffee and some scones. Ali was of course as

understanding as she was the day before. Katie felt like she was somehow also talking to her mom in a way. Maybe because Ali and her mom became great friends at the end, or because Ali just reminded Katie of her mom. When they got back to the house, Katie was surprised to see her father's car there. He wasn't supposed to be home for another couple hours.

He was at the front door before Katie and Ali got out of the car and waved his hands for both of them to come over.

"Dad, I thought you couldn't get off work this week?"

"I called in a few favors," he said, "I thought I would surprise you, and Ali would you please join us for dinner? I want to thank you for being there with Katie yesterday, and today."

"No need to thank me, really, It's my pleasure," Ali said.

"All the same, would you join us?"

Katie looked up to Ali with hopeful eyes, and Ali smiled in agreement, "Of course. Thank you."

Her father pulled out all the stops for Katie. It was like a birthday party and everything was rainbow. Balloons filled the living room ceiling, and he wrapped Katie's usual dining table chair with rainbow streamers. Dean showed up just before dinner, per her father's invite, arriving with a rainbow flag tied around his neck. It was more than Katie ever imagined this moment would be like. They laughed and ate together and then her father brought in a large cake for dessert. When he cut it, the inside had rainbow layers.

Ali and Dean left around 8 o'clock. Before Ali left though she turned back to Katie and lifted the piece of her hair that was dyed red.

"I think you should make that a rainbow too," Ali said with a wink and then left.

Katie and her dad sat together in the living room.

"Thank you dad, this was... the best day of my life."

"Many more best days in your future, I'm sure," Ben said, smiling to his daughter. "Oh, and I forgot to ask, but did your mother leave you another map, or was that the last one?"

"There's another letter, I just haven't opened it yet," Katie said, feeling surprised that she hadn't done so.

"Well?" Ben said.



“Be right back.”

Katie returned from her bedroom in a flash and knelt before the cocktail table in the living room as she opened the envelope. Her father leaning forward on the couch beside her. Katie unfolded the thicker paper and read it through.

*My Loves,*

*This one requires a team effort. And the team is father and daughter.*

Beneath that, there was a long math equation and another riddle.

“I’m guessing the math equation is for me,” Ben said.

“Yea I don’t even know what that symbol is,” Katie confessed.

“An integr—”

“I didn’t say I wanted to know,” Katie interrupted with an evil looking grin.

“Fair enough,” Ben laughed. “That means the riddle is all yours.”

Katie leaned forward over the paper to read the riddle a few times over.

*The first half of Summer;*

*You must subtract to add.*

*Just a piece of piece;*

*And a part of part.*

*The Third in order or level;*

*And just the first third of that*

*Now, put them together!*

Soon, Katie and Ben both had pen and paper and were working out their half of the puzzle. Her father finished first. Apparently it was, “easy.”

“The answer comes out to 84,” he said, “How’s the riddle coming?”

"I'm getting there," Katie said, keeping her head down, "It's all about building a word I think. Each two lines describes part of a word. I got the first two already, and just need the last one."

"What do you have so far?"

"Well, the first half of Summer, and subtracting to add, is just Sum. Subtracting the m.e.r. and you get Sum!"

"Very mathematical," her father joked.

"Ha, ha," Katie joked back.

"The second part?"

"It says a piece of piece, and a part of part. So, I think that's just the letter P. It's the only thing they both share and it's just a piece of the word piece and just a part of the word part!"

"Very good."

"Just not sure about this last one."

"Can I help?"

"Umm... sure," Katie said, deciding her mother did allow for the team effort.

"The third in order or level, and just the first third of that," Ben read aloud. "Third in order or level, that could be just the third thing right?"

"Yea, but the first letters of that don't fit with Sum and p."

"Ahh!" Ben exclaimed in understanding. "Same idea, just need a different word. Tertiary," he said.

"Tertiary," Katie repeated writing down the word. "The first third is probably T.E.R. Now put it all together and you get S.U.M.P.T.E.R."

"84 Sumpter," Ben said with understanding flashing across his face.

"What's that? Do you know where that is?"

"I do," he said, looking deep in thought.

"Well, don't leave me hanging dad!"

"Sorry, just threw me for a loop there, it's... it's where your mother and I met."

"Woah! Well, can we go now?"

"It's over an hour away—how about tomorrow—after work... I promise."

“Deal.”

## chapter 6

# THE ARCADE

“The Sumpter Theater & Arcade!”

Katie stared up at the sign lit by big bright multi-colored light bulbs. The words in bright white bulbs, and the background red and yellow and blue. It had a retro look, yet it seemed to have kept up with the times as well. Katie was expecting carpet from the 1970’s, but most everything was updated and fairly new looking. From her father’s face though, she also figured not much had changed overall.

“I can’t believe we never took you here!” Ben said as he stepped forward to go inside, Katie having to jog a few steps to catch up.

“It *was* over an hour away,” Katie said, but she didn’t think he heard her.

Once they stepped inside, the lights and noises overloaded the senses, but it made her smile. A ticket booth behind a glass wall held a line for those purchasing movie tickets. Red carpet, lined with gold accents covered the entire floor. A concession stand in the middle handled multiple lines of families and kids walking away with popcorn, and candy, and sodas. To the right was a giant arcade with games of all kinds. To the left, a line formed behind some ropes as a man ripped tickets and let people beyond to the various movie theaters. Dings from winning arcade games, and music filled the air. Katie was in heaven. Then, she looked up to her dad, who looked to be entranced by the whole place.

“Dad, come on,” she said, grabbing his hand.

“Right, sorry,” he smiled back to her. “this way.”

Ben brought Katie towards the arcade, and then walked just a little further passed it where there was a small area she didn’t notice. A dozen tables for people to eat at, and a single vendor selling hotdogs, and hamburgers. Katie watched her father take a seat at one of the empty booths and Katie went to join him.

“Your mother sat here with her friends,” he said. “and I sat over there with mine.” He pointed to a table about ten feet away which currently had a family of four sitting together. Katie was mesmerized. “Pretty typical night out. Went to see a movie, grab something to eat, and then

spend whatever money we had left at the arcade. Hard to believe we were only a couple years older than you are now.”

“What happened next?” Katie pined for more details.

“I couldn’t stop staring at her,” he laughed. “She was so beautiful, but when she laughed, even more so. Even when she looked my way, I couldn’t turn away and pretend I wasn’t staring. I was transfixed. Luckily, she smiled back.” He sat in a daze for a moment, then looked back at Katie, “Come on.”

“Well wait, maybe there’s something hidden under the table?” Katie said, and her father turned back with assurance in his eyes.

“She wouldn’t leave anything there. Come on, the story continues.” He grinned broadly and gestured for Katie to follow.

They left the food area and made their way over to the arcade. Ben paused for a second and then put in a few dollars into the machine by the entrance and pocketed the coins it returned.

“Great! No one’s there right now,” he said, and again moved forward in his own world. Katie followed closely.

He stopped in front of a game with two large plastic guns connected to the machine. The screen in front displayed zombies being shot, and Katie read the title on the top of the arcade machine.

“House of the Dead 3? Seriously?” She said.

Her father laughed out loud and put coins into the machine, “choose your weapon,” he said, and Katie picked up the red gun in front of her. Ben picked up the blue one and within a few seconds they were blasting zombies off the screen. “You reload by shooting off the screen,” Ben called to Katie without taking his eyes off the zombies.

“What does this have to do with meeting mom?” Katie said.

“When we came into the arcade after eating that night,” Ben started, as they both blasted more zombies from the screen. “I came here to my favorite game. My friends were more into the racing games, but all of a sudden,” he paused to concentrate on the zombie killing that needed doing in the moment, then continued. “There she was, next to me, putting her own coins into the

machine.” Ben chuckled to himself, and looked over to Katie as they just cleared the level and had a moment to relax. “She chose the red one too.”

Katie beamed, and instantly felt a kinship with the game, and focused harder on the second level.

“Your mother teased me the whole time, and I teased back, and I remember laughing and smiling more than anytime in my life. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘you can do better than that! My grandma has better aim.’ It was non stop, and I’d say something in return like, ‘Well, my grandma has cataracts and she’s way better than you.’ After a few minutes we were both laughing so hard the zombies killed us.”

Katie looked away from the game for a second, and noticed her father had a big smile on his face and a single tear falling down his right cheek. The zombies killed her character, and her father looked over to her and let the zombies take his character as well. He hugged her and kissed her on the forehead.

“I was only 16, your mother 15, and the connection was instant. After that night, I saw her or talked to her on the phone almost every night. God, we had such a great time together.” He sniffed, wiped his eyes, and squatted lower to be eye to eye with Katie. “She was a special person, your mom. Special to the core. You should’ve had more time with her, but I see it in you every day that she already left you everything she ever could. I see her in you so much.”

Katie’s eyes welled with tears, but she also had a smile on her face. “I miss her,” Katie said.

“I know. I do too, everyday. But,” he said standing up straighter, hands on Katie’s shoulders. “If your mom were here, what would she say?”

“Probably make fun of us for crying over her,” Katie said, and Ben laughed.

“Probably. Your mom was always about making life a good time. So, I think we still have a job to do. If your mother hid anything here, it’s going to be by this game. I’m sure of it. Let’s check around the back of it.”

Katie and Ben moved to the sides of the arcade game and tried to look behind it.

“I think I see something,” Katie called through the back of the machine. “but I can’t fit my arm back there.”

“Let me see if I can move it out a bit,” her father called back, and soon the whole arcade game was inching forward away from the wall. As soon as the space opened wide enough, Katie shot her hand behind the machine and her hand closed upon another ziplock bag holding two new envelopes.

“Hey!” came an unknown voice suddenly, and when Katie got to her feet again there was an older man with a red and white pin-striped shirt, indicative of the employees of Sumpter’s Theater and Arcade, standing in front of her father. “What are you doing?” the man said.

“I’m sorry sir,” Ben began. “There was just something left for us behind this machine, and we had to get it. A...scavenger hunt of sorts.” Katie held up the ziplock bag with the envelopes. “I’ll put the machine back right now. I promise.”

The man’s eyes went from Katie, to the envelopes, and back to Ben. “I was wondering when someone was going to come for that,” he said.

“What?” Katie asked.

“A women came—a while back—asked if she could hide that behind the machine—asked if I would ensure that no maintenance person chucked it or something. I helped her move the game and everything. Nice woman. Quite cheeky though,” The man chuckled.

“Sounds like my wife,” Ben said.

“Well, let’s move this back,” the man said, walking over to help. Once back in position, the man began to walk away and then turned back to wave goodbye. “I hope the prize is something good,” he said, pointing to the envelopes in Katie’s hand.

“Priceless,” Katie answered.

## Chapter 7

# THE FINAL RIDDLE

That night, after another hour exploring the arcade, and an hour drive back home, Katie and her father were back in their living room staring at two new letters. Katie on the floor again, and Ben leaning over the couch.

As was the pattern, the first letter was a note from her mother. Something Katie was supposed to learn from this treasure hunt. The letter read:

*My Katie,*

*Isn't this fun!*

*It often feels good when the deed is done, when the work is done... Able to rest from our toils, from our burdens and all the challenges we've overcome... but don't you see now how this is so wrong? As you ache now hoping this letter isn't the last one. You see, this shows you that it's the journey, and not the destination, that you must aim to love. That's the true prize, greater than any one. So, remember that the journey is your true quest, and the journey is never done.*

*Ok, I'm getting carried away with my rhyming, but I'm sure you get the idea. Happiness, my daughter, is not the result of something. It's how you approach life itself; how you approach the journey. I hope you always find something to smile at, laugh about, and love with all your heart. It's always there... you just have to be looking for it. So, I hope you remember this adventure, and choose to be happy every day, wherever your journey takes you.*

*I love you so much,*

*Mom*

Katie had to agree. She knew that what had made her the happiest on this adventure so far was that it kept going. She hadn't paused to think about what it would be like if the letters stopped—when there was only one letter at the end of whatever clue or riddle her mother left her.



Ben read the letter next, and then Katie opened the second envelope containing what seemed to be the final riddle.

*A team effort is required again...  
There's one more treasure, but you'll never find it.  
Look behind, underneath, and beside;  
but all your searching will never lead to this treasure of mine.  
Yet, search all same, and search for the game;  
for you never know what other treasures might be obtained.*

“What does that mean?” Katie said, looking up to her father confused handing him the riddle. It wasn’t like any of the other riddles her mother left.

Ben shook his head slowly while starrng at the riddle, “I... don’t... know,” he said slowly.

“We’re supposed to just look around aimlessly? Or apparently not look around and just somehow find it? Or not find it?” Katie said, feeling frustrated. “Why would she do that? What if we never find the next letter?”

“Katie,” Ben said, with a strength in his voice, “none of the things your mother has done so far have been without a plan. Have faith in her, and in yourself. And!” Ben raised a finger to the ceiling, “Think about the letter we just read from her. It’s about the journey. Treasure or no treasure. Letter or no letter.”

Katie made a *humph* and then said, “I guess you’re right. There’s gotta be something else to it.”

“Before we go to bed, we might as well check under the couch cushions, right?” Ben said, and Katie’s smile returned.

Together they tore the cushions off the couch and from the other seats in the living room. No letters lurked underneath, but Katie didn’t feel disappointed now. She felt excitement again. The hunt was on!

. . .

With the start of April the next morning, started a new game for Katie and her father. At random times, and on random days, they'd search the house for the final letter. By the end of the month, Dean was recruited into the hunt and on certain days after school they'd search together as well. They never found anything except for some lost pennies and nickels. Yet, they kept searching.

May and June passed in similar fashion, but now the house had been searched up and down. Katie had her father invite Ali over for dinner again one night and Katie told Ali the full story of everything that had happened since they last spoke. She showed her the letters and riddles tacked on the wall of her room too. Ali also took Katie to a salon, and Katie spent the last couple weeks of school with half of her head dyed in the colors of the rainbow.

The summer was full of adventures and more searching. Ben decided to take Katie to other spots like the Sumpter Theater and Arcade. He would tell her more stories about her mother, and then they'd search those spots for her mother's final letter. They never expected to find anything, but searched all the same. Katie's birthday party in August was filled with family from out of state, Dean and other friends, and Ali, who had also become a more frequent guest for dinner.

The new school year began, Katie's first year in High School, and it felt like the same old thing. The only difference was Katie had new eyes for someone other than Hannah. A girl from the other middle school that she'd never met before. As the Holidays approached, Katie had her first girlfriend, Sarah, and they helped set Dean up with his first girlfriend, Chelsea.

. . .

On Christmas Eve, Katie and her father spent the morning putting flowers on her mother's grave. Katie thanked her mother for the riddles, and the letters.

"I just wish she knew that I got it. That they helped me come out, and even just helped this year be fun," Katie said to her father, leaning against his shoulder.

“She knows, Katie,” he said.

They spent the rest of the afternoon trying to make the most of the holiday. Together, they prepared snacks and started putting together a dinner as if they were hosting a big party. Music filled the house as they worked and when everything was in the oven, Katie and her father sat down at the kitchen island eating some of the cheese and crackers.

*Knock, Knock!*

The sound startled them both as they definitely weren’t expecting any visitors. They both went to the door together as they were both extremely curious, and when they opened the door they both smiled.

“Ali!” Katie said, moving forward to give her a hug.

“Come on in,” Ben said, also smiling by the surprise. “This is a nice surprise, what brings you over?”

Suddenly, both Ben and Katie went silent as Ali’s face looked full of nerves and fear.

“Can I just say,” Ali began. “that I made a promise not to say a word?”

“What are you talking about?” Ben said.

“Here,” Ali said, pulling an envelope out from inside her jacket and holding it out towards Katie.

“You?” Katie said, stunned so much by Ali presenting the envelope that she didn’t grab it.

“Me,” Ali confirmed. “Like I said, I made a promise to your mom, not to deliver this until a year after she died. I hope you’ll understand.”

“So,” Katie said, “you dropped off the first letter too, last year?”

“Yes,” Ali nodded, looking guilty.

“And you placed the other clues, and envelopes around the house,” Katie stated, and then added, “and in that tree?!”

“Yes,” Ali nodded. “Before you get mad, please know I didn’t want to lie to you. And I didn’t know that I would end up getting so close to you. To both of you,” she looked towards Ben and then back to Katie. “I would’ve done anything for your mom, and although sneaking around your house was very odd and I felt really awkward doing it... she asked and so I did it.

She gave me a key, told me your schedules. Told me to scout out the area around the park where I found that tree to place the letter. I told you I grew really close to your mom. She was my best friend and I'd only known her less than a year."

"Then," Ben said, realization dawning upon him. "*you* put the envelopes behind the Zombie arcade machine? You're the 'cheeky woman.' It wasn't Faye, it was... *you*..."

"That man kept calling me 'cheeky' the whole time," Ali laughed. "but he started the joking around. But, yes, I put them there as well."

A look of understanding washed over Ben's face, as he stared at Ali, and Ali stared back not looking away.

"Ben, Katie, I am so sorry if I had to lie to you since April. It killed me as you searched for that last letter, and I knew I had it."

"It's ok," Katie finally said. "It was supposed to be that way. If it's what mom wanted, then you did the right thing."

"You're... not mad?" Ali said.

"Absolutely not," Ben said.

"Yea, no way," Katie agreed, and Ali's face filled with color, "you did what mom said, and made it all possible. And I'm happy I texted you that first time."

"I am too, Katie," Ali said, her eyes watering. "Well, I don't want to intrude on your Christmas Eve, and I'm sure you want some privacy while you read the letter, oh," Ali paused and reached back into her jacket but on the other side. She pulled out a stack of envelopes. "These are copies of all the ones you found. I was to give these to you as well in case things didn't turn out as planned. Thought you might want them all the same?" Ben took the envelopes and then Ali turned to leave.

"Wait," Ben said, and Katie echoed the same sentiment. "What are your plans for tonight?"

"Oh, ummm, nothing," Ali confessed with an awkward smile. "Just got off work a couple hours ago. A quiet night for me, watch a movie or something."

"That's silly," Ben said, "please stay and join us. There's more than enough food and we'd love it if you stayed."

“Yea, definitely!” Katie added.

“I’m in,” Ali said with a shrug of her shoulder and they moved back into the kitchen to sit at the Island.

“It’s all yours,” Ben said to Katie who tore open the envelope and unfolded the final letter from her mother.

*My darling Katie, and my loving Husband,*

*I hope you’ve had more fun this year than you’ve grieved. I wanted to do something with my final days that would give you a chance to do that, to enjoy this year, and not waste time missing me. I’m always there with you, in your hearts, and I’ll visit you in your dreams. But the world before you is for the living, and you must live it. My wish is not that you forget me, but that you never worry or feel the need to constantly memorialize me, or tell the world you love me. I know it, and the world knows it. Love the life right in front of you and only look back with joy.*

*So, don’t honor me with flowers and tears over my grave... on second thought while writing this I probably should’ve been cremated, oh well... instead honor my life and my death by living your life as fully as you can. Nothing will help you feel my presence more than when you’re smiling and laughing and loving. I’ll be there. Smiling with you. Always loving you. Your future is what you make it, and my only hope before I die is that you live it with no regrets.*

*I love you both forever,*

*Faye, aka mom*

Katie read the letter again, and one more time before she looked up to her father and Ali. They were leaning over the island, watching. She passed the letter to her father, who read it and Ali moved over to give Katie a hug. Katie melted into her arms and felt at ease.

“Well,” Ben broke the silence, folding up the letter and handing it back towards Katie.

“I’d say a toast was in order. Hold on.”

Ben moved about the kitchen, filling two glasses of wine for himself and Ali, and pouring Katie a glass of the hot apple cider they made earlier.

“To Faye,” Ben said looking happy and teary eyed, “To mom,” he nodded towards Katie.

“To Faye,” Ali said, clicking her glass gently into Ben’s and they locked eyes.

Katie looked from Ali, to her father, and figured that Ali didn’t so much come into their lives as she was sent. Another part of her mother’s plan no doubt. Katie put her glass into the middle.

“To Mom.”