

UNTITLED

by Kayla Sprague

## Chapter 1

"Make sure that you get my research paper done tonight. I'll fail this quarter if I don't get a good grade on it." Tara said standing in my doorway. She didn't ask me if I would do it, she expected it. It wasn't that I liked doing homework for her, but I didn't know what she would do to me if I didn't. So as usual I replied,

"Alright..." But as I muttered that word I realized that she was wearing my Grandma's locket. How dare she wear the locket that grandma gave ME before she died?

"Why are you wearing my locket?" I tried to say calmly.

"This isn't yours." She replied.

"Uh... Yeah it is. And it's very important to me. Can you please give it back?" I pleaded. Grandma was the only person who valued me for who I was and that locket reminds me of that every day.

"It's MINE now retard." She said in the snobbiest of voices and then she turned around and slammed the door to my room shut. I couldn't believe this. Sure she has always pushed me around, but usually not something so important to me.

"Tara! Please GIVE IT BACK!" I yelled down the stairs. I made my way across the room to go downstairs and find her... BAM! The door flew open and hit me in the face. My nose felt broken Tara had a grimace on her face like I had never seen before. It was a grimace that appeared as though she wanted to kill me. I reached my hand up to my nose because I felt something dripping. Yes, blood was now making its way into my mouth and the taste gagged me.

"Hahaha!" Tara chuckled, "Didn't even have to hit you, the door did it for me." I couldn't understand why she wanted to hit me in the first place, but I decided not to think about the reason at the moment. I just needed to get up to get a tissue. The blood was not only on my shirt but on the carpet too. I reached for the box of tissues by my bed... UHH!!... Before I could reach them Tara grabbed the tissue box and in anger threw it across the room. She paused and then said, "You wimpy, pathetic, good for nothing punk. You clearly don't belong ANYWHERE! I am going

to wear this locket today Julia May, and you're not going to do anything about it! Grandma can just GO TO HELL and I don't care. You might as well too so you can spend 'quality time' with her." she finished as she stomped out of the room.

It is not that those were different words than she had been telling me all of my life, because they were all the same old same old. And it wasn't that I believed them, but after being told that for so very long it kind of gets to me now. I start wondering if I truly belong anywhere but alone. We've lived in six states in the past nine years because of my dad's stupid job and every time my parents ask me to make new friends. When really, who am I kidding? I can't even become friends with my sister. Just when I get accustomed to a new school and teachers, we move and then I get to start all over. That reminds me, I should start on Tara's paper I guess...

I realized that my nose was not broken, just bruised. After cleaning up the blood on my face and the carpet I jumped on the computer to get to work. I worked for about two good hours until I finally was finished. By the end my mind spun as I was really questioning WHY I should try to do stuff of my sister when she clearly would never give two

cents for me. I guess I am starting to figure out that I'm afraid of what will happen if I don't. What would happen to our family? What would happen to Joshy? *Oh... JOSH!* I was supposed to pick him up from after school care today. I glanced at the computer's time and it read 5:30 pm. Josh was supposed to be picked up at 5:00. I rushed downstairs and grabbed my car keys. I cannot believe I forgot again. Who am I? Why can't I do anything right?

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I pulled up to the after school care driveway and saw my mothers car in the parking lot. Uh-oh, I'm pretty sure that she won't be happy with me. I was contemplating on whether to just drive away and wait until mom came home for unleashed fire or simply walk in and tell apologize for forgetting again. You see, I only have to pick up Joshy on Thursdays and since Thursdays are only once a week I forget sometimes what day it is. I finally decided to drive home and wait for trouble to come to me instead of facing it head on. Too bad that I didn't make my decision two seconds earlier because just as I put my car in reverse my mother and brother walked out into the parking lot.

"Jules! Jules!" Joshy shouted as he saw me in my car.

The look on my mothers face turned from frustrated to absolutely raving. Oh boy, I sure had a treat coming for me. She tried to open the back door and it was locked.

"Unlock this door this instant young lady!" She fumed.

I unlocked it and replied, "Mom, I didn't lock it on purpose. I promise."

"Well, you also PRRRRRRRRRRomised that you would pick up Josh on Thursdays. Didn't you?" She said with sarcasm as she helped buckle Joshy into his seat. I heard him start crying like he always does when he feels like something isn't right. He has downs syndrome and shouldn't have to deal with the stress of this conversation so I tried my best to stay calm.

"I just forgot mom. I'm sorry. I'll try my best not to let it happen again." I said in as much of an apologetic tone that my real feelings could muster up.

"Do you think that it looks good for me to have to leave a meeting at work to pick up my special needs kid from day care? Do you?" She said obviously not realizing that her son was getting overly stressed because of our heated conversation. "I tried to call you and you wouldn't..." she paused and then continued, "Julia May, is that blood on your shirt?"

First remembering that I never turned my phone off of silent after school and that's why I didn't hear her call. Then trying to think of the best way to answer her question. I guess I simply 'Yes' would do.

"Yes, it is blood." I said.

"Well, you better clean it up. We just bought you that shirt." She said sternly without even asking where the blood came from. At that she closed the car door and walked away. Joshy's crying was subsiding a little now and because mom was gone and there wouldn't be any more arguments in the car. Thank goodness! I started to drive away, wishing that argument had never had to happen.

"Why'd you forget me Jules?" said the seven year old voice in the back seat.

"I didn't forget you Joshy. I could never forget you. I just forgot that today was Thursday, the day I pick you up." I said, trying my hardest to be convincing and chipper.

"That's not what mommy said." He replied in a sheepish voice and then pausing to think he looked out the window.

I wonder what mom said. I mean to her little boy about her little girl? But I didn't want to make Josh think about it anymore and changed the subject.

"How was school today buddy?" I asked.

"It was WONDERFUL! We painted punkins 'cause it's almost Halloween. We had pizza for lunch and that's my favorite! And we got to eat cupcakes in class for Marvin's birthday." He said.

"Cool man! That sounds like a wonderful day!"

I just loved watching him light up like that. He was such a joy to listen to. Not a care in the world. He was always just living life to the fullest as much as he could. He doesn't usually even realize he's different from the other kids. Unless they are the ones that point it out. Oh, how I wish Joshy was in a better family to encourage him. He deserves more than what we can give. It makes me want to try harder, be better, become... perfect. Just for him. Maybe someday I will.

"How come blood got on your new brand shirt?" he asked saying 'new brand' instead of 'brand new' as always.

"Oh, I ran into the door and it made my nose bleed." I said. Which was true... or well, I guess the door more ran into me.

"Ouch... I hope it feels better soon." was all he said as he drifted from this world into his world and looked out the window in a daze. Joshua was my favorite person in the

whole wide world. Better than any teacher, he shows me HOW life is supposed to be lived. I wish I was a faster learner.

"We're home! We're home! We're home!" he squealed unbuckling his seat belt and bouncing up and down as we pulled into the driveway. Why did he like home so much? To me it was just a house. At that moment is when I decided to make this house home to him in whatever way I knew how. I wanted Joshy to be happy. I wanted him to love life even if for me that was impossible.

"Last one to the door is a rotten egg." He said as he pushed the car door open.

I noticed a police car in front of the neighbor's house. I wonder what that's all about. Realizing that it is none of my business, I focused back on Joshy and replied, "I'm coming crazy boy."

He ran up the stairs and through the front door. That's weird; I thought I had locked the door before I left and even when we're home we always leave the door locked.

"You're the rotten egg!" Joshy yelled laughing under his breath. I tried to act like nothing was wrong and picked him up and spun him around. We were hungry and decided to go get a snack and before entering the kitchen

my heart skipped a beat. A policeman was sitting at the kitchen table talking to my dad. What could be wrong? Abruptly the tall man stood to his feet and cleared his throat.

"Are you Julia May Carter?" his deep voice resounded. My mind started spinning. Why did he know my name? I didn't do anything. Why was he at OUR house? I tried my best to gain my composure again.

"Yes sir. I'm Julia." I finally said after pausing. I'm pretty sure that the words came out as fast as a spooked horse runs, but hopefully the tree-man in front of me didn't notice.

"You're who I am looking for." He said in a very even tone.

## **Chapter 2**

Thoughts were spinning through my pea sized brain. I couldn't believe what my ears were telling me. He was looking for me? A HUGE man in a blue uniform was looking for me? What for? What did I do wrong? My heart was racing faster than a NASCAR racer. My head was spinning about as fast as spinner hubcaps after that racecar comes to an abrupt stop. My hands were shaking like a rattlesnake's

tail. Finally I muttered a one word question to the man, and it took all of the strength I had.

"Me?" my voice kind of squeaked as the question came off of my lips.

"Yes, if you are, in fact, Julia May Carter." He said almost amused. "Why don't you have a seat." He motioned to the table. Although my legs felt like jello, I somehow managed to make my way into the chair. Once I was safely seated I grabbed the edges of the wood to steady my quivering body. I tried to tell myself that I shouldn't be nervous because I didn't do anything wrong, but it didn't help. What I really wanted to do was run. And I wanted to grab Joshy up in my arms as I did, because he was sheepishly standing against the wall trying to figure out what was going on.

"Julia, my name is Officer Gharst and I need to ask you a few questions. Is that alright with you?" He asked while opening a folder and pulling out a notebook.

"Yes..." I replied while glancing at my dad's face. I was going to say more than just 'yes' to answer the blue uniformed man, but once I saw the look of disappointment smeared across my daddy's face I was speechless.

"Okay, where were you this afternoon?" he asked.

"I was here."

"What were you doing?"

"Working on a research paper." I replied.

"Good. Good. I need you to go and get that paper for me to look at." He said.

Without saying a word I ran upstairs to get the paper. Good thing I printed it off right before I realized that I was late picking my brother up.

"Here you go." I said.

"This isn't your paper. It is your sister's." The Officer Gharst said.

Oh my goodness! I forgot. I had written the paper for Tara and had put Tara's name on it. Regrets piled through my brain as I tried to think of something else to say. I couldn't tell the truth... or could I? Gosh, I just don't know.

"Oh, well... uh. May I ask a question?" I muttered. Then mustering up all the courage I had in me, "What did I do wrong?"

"I think that you very well know miss. I am going to have to take you down the police station for some more questioning." He said.

He unclipped the handcuffs from his belt and proceeded in closing them around my wrists. He stood up to lead me out of the house.

"Can I come?" asked Joshy moving from his stance against the wall.

"I don't think that it would be very fun." replied my dad. Then he looked me in the eye and unlike usual I couldn't tell at all what he was thinking and that scared me more than anything. I expected Joshy not coming but because there was no one else home, Joshy not coming meant my dad wasn't coming either. As I walked out of the house an overwhelming sense of fear gripped me. Not only did my house feel like a home. My house wasn't even a safe place and I didn't do anything wrong!

"Watch your head." Officer Gharst said as he opened the car door and motioned for me to get in.

The car ride to the station was only a few miles but it seemed like forever to me. The darkness outside seemed to creep into my very soul. Tears one by one made their way down my face even though I really had no reason to be crying. So, I tried my best to hold them in.

Once we arrived I was lead through the front door, down a hallway, and into a little room. I'm guessing this

is where the questioning is going to take place. Officer Gharst was now accompanied by another man. This man was nothing like Gharst. He was short and actually looked like he possessed the ability to smile judging from the wrinkles around his mouth and eyes. Somehow I already felt better having him in the room too.

The little man walked over and pulled out a chair for me to sit in.

"Hello there, I am Officer Spring. I'm going to tell you the situation that you are accused of. Anything you do or say can and probably will be used against you in the court."

"I understand." I said plainly. At least now I'm going to get to hear what I supposedly did wrong.

"Alright, at approximately 3:30pm today the old warehouse building on 75<sup>th</sup> and Freemont St. was set aflame by what as far as we know of were teenagers. We assume this because a teenager reported that some teens from her school had been talking about doing it and then when it happened she came up to the station to alert us. It was probably just a 'joke'. An emotional high..." He paused and looked up at me, probably to examine my facial expression. He smiled, a fake, plastered smile and then continued. "Or whatever,

but this was more serious than a building burning down. There was a man in the building. His name: Lionel Burch. As of right now we do not know what he was doing in the building, but what we do know is that he is now in the ICU because of 2<sup>nd</sup> and a few 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns all over his body. Apparently he couldn't find a way out and it took the fireman 30 minutes to realize that he was inside."

Through my head raced a million things that I could say: "Will be be alright? Or "How dare you accuse me? I would never do such a thing." Or "I didn't do it. I did NOT do it!" or "You stupid officers, can't even tell a criminal from an upstanding citizen." Then out of my mouth came, "What does this stuff have to do with me?" Hopefully it didn't come off too offensive. I really did want to know why I was the one sitting in this drab room with two men. Shouldn't THAT be against the law?!

"A reliable source led us to believe that you were apart of the whole shindig." said Officer Gharst, in a stern voice as he looked me directly in the eyes. I almost felt as if he was violating my space staring into my eyes so hard, but then again, I guess he thought I was not only a criminal, but also a liar now.

Who would do that to me? Who would blame me for something that I wouldn't do in a million years? "Am I aloud to know who that 'reliable source' was?" I questioned.

The two officers looked at each other and nodded their heads. "No, unfortunately not until the court date when you both are sworn into honesty." replied Officer Spring.

"Did you just say COURT?" I exclaimed, a little two suddenly for the men in the room with me. They both jumped a little and had to resituate in order to answer my question.

"Yes, don't you know how the judicial system works?" asked Gharst in a very condescending way. I was speechless simply because I didn't know how to respond. So, I forced myself to nod my head up and down. Officer Spring butted in and in a much more pleasant way said,

"Juila, given the source and the evidence that is what we must do. I'm so sorry dear." He paused, looked at Officer Gharst who was still looking at me wanting eye contact, and then Spring continued, "but as for right now you get to go home and are fine until the court date. Unless Mr. Burch dies, then this whole thing becomes a much bigger deal."

"Don't tell anyone except your family about all of this." said Officer Gharst.

"Okay." I replied, wondering why, but not wanting to risk asking.

As the two men wrote some other stuff down and seemed to be wrapping things with me up, I began to wonder, "How soon would this court thing be? Do I have time to prove myself innocent?"

A grin spread across Officer Spring's face. Woops, I realized that I had just said those last two questions OUT LOUD.

"Um, well, to answer your questions. You're court date is currently scheduled for December 1<sup>st</sup>. That's a little over a month from now, which should give you plenty of time." said Spring.

Well at least it's not next week, I suppose. Remembering that I had no way to get home except walking and it was already black as my Labrador's fur outside, I resolved to asking for a ride. Officer Gharst reluctantly agreed and that was that.

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It was about 8 pm when I arrived to my house, that wasn't truly my home, once again. I was greeted at the door

by my father. He apologized for not being able to come with, but that it was probably a good experience going alone. What I was wondering was why I would ever need 'experience' in being questioned at a police office? Does he think I'm going to grow up to be a criminal or something? But I probably just took that statement wrong.

Then my mother walked in. Flashbacks from earlier that day overcame me. I was late to pick up Joshy and she was upset at me already. Now the look on her face sent butterflies into my stomach. I didn't know what to say first. So I just said what came to my mind first.

"I didn't do it!" I said.

"You better not have done it young lady, but because of the responsibility you showed me today I wouldn't be surprised." she replied.

Her words cut me deep. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized how true they were. I was so irresponsible in the little things, how could they know that I wouldn't be in the larger things.

"Well, I don't know what the officers were talking about but I was here all afternoon." I said.

My mom's face got suddenly very suspicious. She gave my dad one look and he walked out of the room. "Then why were you late to pick up Josh?" she questioned.

No way, I couldn't believe that my own mother was questioning me about this. "I already told you why mom, I just forgot that it was Thursday."

"Why was there blood on your shirt?"

"What in the world does that have to do with anything? I ran into a door!" I said, trying to be convincing. I really couldn't believe the outcome of this day but I was tired and just wanted to finish my homework and go to sleep. "I'm going to retire for the night; I don't really care what you think I did. I didn't burn down any building and I wish you would believe me." Then I ran up to my room and slammed the door behind me.

### **Chapter 3**

Beep...Beep...Beep...Beep... Beeeeeeeeeep... Sounds of my alarm that reminded me of a heart monitor filled my ears. Ugh, I couldn't believe it was already morning. Sleep is the only thing that sounds good. My body reluctantly rolled out of bed and into the shower while my head ached thinking about

the happenings of yesterday. I almost couldn't make sense of it anymore. At least today was Friday!

Somehow I made my way through the morning. Probably, the only reason was that I knew that I had lunch with Lydia. Lydia really befriended me last school year. We had English together and... I don't know something just clicked. It was different than people from other moves that were friendly to me for the first couple of days and then literally forgot that I even existed for the remainder of the year. No, Lydia was different. And so was her mother. I can't explain it, really.

Anyway, I ran to my locker to grab my lunch box (Yes, I still bring my lunch from home. School food is nasty!). I walked toward the lunch room and Tara was standing in a crowd of her friends. I hadn't seen her since yesterday afternoon when she wanted me to finish her paper. Even last night I had avoided conflict by sliding the assignment under her door and then running into my own room before I went to bed. She was STILL wearing grandma's locket, which made me a quite upset, but I tried to just walk by and not make eye contact.

"Hey Jules..." Tara shouted as she jogged over to me, being careful not to drop her lunch tray. I guess I wouldn't get past without a conversation after all.

"Yeah?" I said trying to be nonchalant about it. Her voice drifted into a whisper as she said,

"I got a 'B' on that paper, what in the world is wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't have time to edit it." I replied in a normal and even-tone.

"So, it is true... you were busy with TROUBLE, that's why you didn't have time, eh?" Tara said as she stepped closer to me. It was getting uncomfortable now, I could feel her piercing breath on my neck and she was really starting to weird me out. "What got into you to burn down a building? And why do you have to ruin my life." she asked as more of a sarcastic statement.

Oh my goodness, this was really starting to get on my nerves. My own family doesn't even believe me. Who else will? Well, hmmm... Lydia. I just wanted to cut of this conversation and get some peace of mind.

"No, you know that it's not true. Or at least you should. A 'B' is better than an incomplete." I replied trying to control my feelings. Suddenly Tara ripped the

locket off of her neck dropped it to the ground and then screamed,

"How could you do such a thing to your own sister?" Tara said. She then pulled a group of preppy kids over to her and said, "She just pulled off my locket. It is the only thing I have left from my grandmother and now it is broken." She reached down to pick it up.

"Are you serious?" said one of the girls that Tara told in a disgusted voice, "There should definitely be harsh punishment for breaking another person's valuable property."

I was utterly confused. Tara was usually mean, but that was a LIE!

"You know that isn't true. It's MY locket in the first place." I yelled. By this time there was a little crowd around us to see if we would fight.

"Hit her!" I party boy advised Tara.

"Show her who NOT to mess with" chimed in another kid.

"You might as well run, like the gingerbread man, because you're about to be digested." A theatre boy said to me. I personally thought that was a very stupid analogy, but everyone in the crowd cheered and thought it was genius.

I had NO intention of fighting my own sister at school. No way, things were just happening too fast. And I didn't really want to run, that would be cowardice.

"See she's not only trying to steal my locket, but also is lying that it is hers." Tara wailed.

"It is mine." I said, being completely honest.

"WHAT?!" a few cheerleaders said and then one continued, "That isn't yours, I saw Tara wearing it this morning in English."

What was I supposed to say to that, they wouldn't listen to my long story. Tara was basically acting for the crowd. She was always that sort of person, and what was worse was that the crowd was on HER side. They loved the action.

The feelings inside of me were just welling up until they were overbearing. "I can NOT believe you!" were the only words that I could manage to get out of my mouth. Then I simply tried to brush by her enough to where I could get through the crowd and into the lunchroom. Well, she overreacted to my little nudge and flung herself and her lunch tray, which on top of rested a salad, spaghetti, and Code Red Mountain Dew.

Principal Kennedy just happened to turn the corner at the precise WRONG moment. I jumped to try to catch the tray, but actually just made it worse. The Mountain Dew poured down the front of his tie and light yellow shirt, turning it pink. The salad got caught in his color and a few leaves on top of his head with dressing smearing down his face. And last but not least, the spaghetti sprang across his whole self and created something like that of a spider web covered suit.

On top of all that, my finger made its way into poking Principal Kennedy's eye as I leaped, which forced him to his knees to regain his composure.

Everyone around was either laughing or gasping and all eyes were on Principal Kennedy and then on to M-E. I couldn't take the attention. The attention I didn't even bring upon myself. The attention my sister thrived on. I thought about running into the girls' bathroom, Principal Kennedy couldn't chase me in there, but how elementary would that be? Very. I decided not to. I decided to stand my ground. What had all started out as a false accusation would probably still sit my behind in the principal's office.

How did I get to this place? I didn't do anything, yet people obviously hated me. Or at least didn't care about my feelings. I just wanted to be loved and accepted like any other teenager on the earth. Why was it so hard for me?

I bent down to start picking up the mess and Principal Kennedy's eyes were not beaming pleasure. They more resembled a hungry tiger's eyes while being teased with food in a cage, plus one of them was blood shot red from me poking his eye. He knew that he had to keep his cool. He was the principal you know. As he slowly rose to his feet, my heart started beating faster and faster. Suddenly Tara burst out,

"She did it! She ran into me and made me drop my lunch!" I was so aggravated by her by now that I tried not to let that last statement and what a lie it was make me more so. Principal Kennedy's eyes piercing into mine while he stood above me made me want to disappear.

I just need a way out, but there wasn't a way out. After we cleaned up the mess the principal proceeded to lead my sister and me down the hallway to his office. How pleasant? I think not. If ever my parents would think that I'm a trouble maker, it would be today and yesterday's happenings that would prove it to them. Even if none of it

was my fault. Plus, on top of it all, Lydia will think I stood her up and she's the one person I want to talk to anyway.

He told me to wait outside the door while he talked to my sister. I slowly slid down the wall until I rested on the ground. At this moment lots of thoughts raced through my head. But one echoed louder than all of the rest combined. I had to prove myself innocent. First, prove to the principal that I did NOT rip the locked off of Tara's neck. It was mine to begin with anyway. And secondly, that I didn't push her. I simply brushed by her so that I could get through the crowd to lunch.

I stared at the clock. Tick... tick... tick... the little hand went round and round and round. I had been sitting there on the wall for ten minutes, but it seemed more like thirty. Finally, Tara slid out through the doorway with a slight grin on her face. That worried me more than the sound of coyotes howling when we are camping.

"Good luck in there." She said in a very sarcastic and babyish voice.

Before I could say anything back I heard the principal say, "Come on, Jules. You know the rules."

Principal Kennedy loved rhyming... it actually worried me sometimes, but it was just how he found enjoyment and everyone that knew him knew that he rhymed whenever possible. I reluctantly stood up and while trying to assure myself everything would be alright, I suddenly told myself, *just make him believe the truth you already know*. Then I was ready, but still worried to face him. I sat down and crossed my legs, by this time I really had to go to the bathroom, but decided it would be best to hold it in until this little meeting was over.

As I looked around the room there was a drawing that one of Principal Kennedy's kids must have drawn for him. Cameras. CAMERAS. YES! YES, There must have been cameras in that hallway. I looked up into his eyes and then he started to open his mouth.

"Now, Julia..."

"Is there cameras above that hallway?" I blurted out before he could even finish his statement. The look on his face almost made me want to laugh. I knew that I was disrespectful but I needed him to know how passionately I knew that it wasn't my fault. I could tell he was cooling down from earlier. He had cleaned himself up a little bit,

probably while he was talking to Tara. And he seemed a little calmer all in all from when the accident happened.

"Um... We probably do have a few with that area in veiw, yeah." He replied slowly after recovering from the shock of my abrupt comment.

I put forth a little more of my new found courage and said, "Well, before we continue this conversation I think that we should go watch the tape." I breathed in and out and then again. It wasn't like me to ever put on brave fronts, I usually just ran away, but today I really didn't want to be in trouble for my sister's lie.

His eyes were basically popping out of his face because he was probably also surprised at my courage, still he didn't seem mad like earlier. He looked down at his desk for a moment and then said, "We're getting a little too hasty aren't we? I got your sister's side of the story and now I need yours, honey." He paused, probably trying to think of something else to rhyme and then continued, "Would you be so kind to tell me?"

"Principal Kennedy, I am not trying to be disrespectful in any way. I just want to see the tape and cut all of this unnecessary talk."

"Okay, I guess we could do that first today." he replied.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I think it will be the fastest way to show you that I didn't do anything wrong."

"You are probably right; it will be fast as light. I better go, don't want to waste time, no, no."

Sometimes his rhyming thing makes me think that he doesn't take anything seriously, but I know he does and he really is a good principal, but just clueless. He left me sitting in his office as he went to find the tape. As he walked out I noticed that he was still a little aggravated probably from the innocent, but seriously, who wouldn't be?

I sat for a while but soon enough he was back to show it to me. He fed the cd into the computer. It took him only a few minutes to find the exact time that the action started.

"There I am." I said.

"I know, just watch the show." He replied sort of sternly, but more just in an annoyed voice. He was just as focused as I was because he wanted to know the truth. To him, he only saw Tara as a leader in the school. Popular

and involved in every activity she could be. So, he probably already suspected it was my fault before even hearing either side of the story.

There it was plain and simple. First, Tara grabbing the locket and ripping it off her own neck and then me simply trying to squeeze by and her over-reacting throw of the tray.

He rewinded it and watched it about 4 times and then just turned and looked at me. The look on his face resembled a lost child, not knowing what to say next or what to do and completely confused at the truth. I couldn't say anything, I just was smiling really big on the inside realizing that I had just proved my innocence.

Woah, that's what I have to do! I have to find that small courage that I found with Principal Kennedy with the poliece. I have to prove that I DIDN'T burn down the building. I have to clear my name and no one is going to do it for me.

#### **Chapter 4**

I got out of that meeting feeling 50 lbs lighter. Actually, just 50 times more brave. That bravery helped me get through the day. And it also helped that I didn't

encounter Tara again. Plus, it was FRIDAY so that put a little spring in my step. The weekend was oh so close.

I checked my phone for the first time since this morning and Lydia had texted me asking where I was at lunch. Go figure... I texted her saying I'M SORRY ABOUT NOT BEING AT LUNCH. I CAN EXPLAIN. CAN YOU WALK HOME FROM SCHOOL WITH ME TODAY? She texted back: OK. I WAS HOPEING THAT YOU WERE ALRIGHT. SEE YOU AT THE FRONT DOOR. As I walked that way I started to wonder what I would tell her about first. It had been a very eventful two days and I hadn't told my best friend any of it.

"Jules!" Lydia yelled as if I didn't see her standing right there. She ran up and squeezed me which made a smile spread across my face and I had only been with her for two seconds. "I've been worried sick ever since you skipped lunch."

"My mind was quite pre-occupied and I didn't purposely 'skip'." I replied.

"You could have at least texted me a little earlier!" She was right. I could have at least let her know that I wasn't coming.

"I know. I know. I just didn't think about it will all the commotion."

"Okay, well it's over now." She said as we started walking out the door and into the cool fall air, "It's time for you to tell me the scoop."

"Alright." I took in a big breath and then let it out, "So, it all started yesterday afternoon when Tara came into my room telling me to get her report done. She was wearing MY locket."

"The one from your grandma?" she asked.

"Yes, that's the one." I replied.

And the whole way home I told her about how I was taken to the police station and questioned by two men in a drab room. She laughed at that, first thinking I was joking. Anyway, as I was telling it all to her, I realized something. Lydia was the best listener. The whole time she was just listening to me and was completely interested in how it made me feel and what I was going to do. I was actually quite amazed and it made me want to be that kind of listener to her.

"WOW! WHO COULD HAVE DONE THAT?!" She exclaimed in a shocked voice. "It sounds like a set up!" she continued

"I know! I cannot believe it either!."

"Well, you HAVE to prove yourself innocent, and you've sure had practice today." She said after I was finished gabbing.

"I AM! I am going to, but I will definitely need some help!"

"I would be more than happy to help, Jules. You should know that." She paused and then said, "You should come over for dinner tonight... what do ya say? It would be good for you to have some stress lifted off your shoulders."

"I would love..." But before I could finish Lydia grabbed my arm and pulled me into the grass away from the road. SCREEEEEECH... there was a car coming straight toward us and as it came to an abrupt stop as the tires skid across the pavement.

My heart and body basically stopped. I couldn't figure out whether to yell or scream or run, but I didn't have to because the fear paralyzed me and I just lay there almost getting run over. When I came to my senses a little bit I realized that I recognized the car. IT WAS MY SISTER'S! I was so confused. Was she not only trying to get me in trouble, but also take my life? I couldn't believe it.

I felt Lydia start to stand up beside me and took that as motivation to get myself onto my feet. As I gained my

balance, I realized that there was a boy in the passenger seat. If Tara couldn't beat us up, her boyfriend definitely could. The driver side door opened up and sure enough Tara stepped out and she didn't look too happy either. I looked over at Julia and she didn't look scared at all. How come? I wish that I knew the answer.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU!" Tara screamed in my face, "Ratting me out to the Principal. How low have you stooped?"

When Tara is mad and on her little rage there's no explaining anything or knocking any REAL logic into her brain. The thing that I've found to do is remember what I know to be true and tell myself that while she feeds me lies, but that didn't help the fact that I was afraid to stand up to her.

"He watched the tape." Lydia said.

Tara's glare went from me to my best friend at that moment and I wanted so badly to do something, but I froze. It's a good thing that Lydia can take care of herself in these kinds of situations. You see, her dad left about 2 years ago, but she has told me stories of before that and how he would abuse her and her mother with his words and actions. Sometimes he pops up and busts into their house

uninvited which causes a scare. But even through it all Lydia has some kind of strength to keep going, I don't know where she gets it from.

"You SO don't want to get into this." Tara said, while starring Lydia down.

"If it's for my best friend, I'm already into it." Lydia said.

I took a snapshot of the moment in my mind. This was so elementary. The bully was simply picking on the younger kids. Why do we stoop so low?

At that point the passenger side window rolled down and the guy in the front seat said, "Come on, Tara, I am so hungry and the last thing I want to do is beat on some girls, plus this is too much of an open area. Other people may see." They looked at each other for a long moment and then he continued, "We can do some other time and place, okay?"

"We better." She replied. Tara glared at us and then swiftly walked back into her car, gave her boyfriend a kiss and drove off.

"Whoa! That would have been an interesting fight." Lydia said, jokingly.

"It's nothing to joke about when your own sister is out to get you." I replied. Lydia looked at me and probably realized that I didn't want to be messed with. So, we walked to her house in silence, thinking about what to do next.

Once we got to her house, Julia asked me if it was alright to get her mom in on the whole court thing so that she could help us in our investigations. I of course replied sure so while we ate spaghetti (which definitely reminded me of the incident with Principal Kennedy only hours before) Lydia and I filled Mrs. Parker in to all the details. And we also told her the Tara run in after school, because Lydia was involved. Her face turned a little pale as we told her about us almost getting hit and I could tell that she was very worried.

"Are you two alright?!" she asked.

"Yes mom... we're just fine." Lydia replied.

Mrs. Parker commented and questioned throughout the different stories, but at the end she said something that really stuck with me.

"Well, I have a lot to say about all of this, but one thing I want to make sure you get Jules is this: Bitterness

is like drinking poison and expecting it to hurt the other person. So, no matter what happens don't get bitter to your sister. Does that made sense?"

I was honestly so confused. She was obviously in some way bitter to me and yet she is REALLY hurting me, whether it be emotionally or physically. Not knowing what part of that statement I believed and what part I didn't I simply replied, "I guess I will try my best."

"That's all that I ask sweet girl. Now whose up for some ICE CREAM?!" Mrs. Parker asked.

"Oh, what do you think our answer will be mom?" Lydia replied with a smile on her face.

"That's what I thought." Mrs. Parker said while starting to clear the table.

"Mrs. Parker..."

"Oh, please call me Susan."

"Are you sure?" I said.

"More than sure." She replied. I could see Lydia and her making eye contact and chuckling under their breath, probably at me. I didn't care though, in this house I already felt welcomed. Then Lydia stood up to help clear and I followed. And then tried to continue what I wanted to say.

"Well, then... Susan, don't you think that I should still try to prove myself innocent?"

"Of course, of course, what I am saying is continue to take the steps needed, but also remind yourself along the way that it's not even against Tara. You already won a "battle" so to speak against Tara today. This is about letting the truth be known, but keeping your heart tender. Does that make sense?"

"I guess it does, but I'm not sure how to do it." I said with complete honesty. I think that even Lydia was surprised at my honesty to her mother. Her mother was so easy to talk to and I think her red hair even helped me feel at ease. It's kind of weird how that happens sometimes.

"As Lydia well knows, I love listening. So, if you ever have trouble or you need something come to me. I know that we don't have a lot, but with what we have we are getting by." She looked at Lydia and I and tears started to well up in her eyes. "I just wish I could be of more help with the financial stuff for a lawyer you are going to run into." They lived in a two-bedroom duplex, it was good sized and everything but I could always tell that she wished she could provide more for her and he daughter.

"Oh, I'm sure my family will help." But was I sure? Susan, nodded her head wiped her eyes and then continued putting dinner stuff away. It was so funny at the Parker's house because before they rinse their plates they let the dog lick them shiny. I'm always worried that they will forget to rinse and wash it and put it straight up in the cupboard, but I try not to think about it that much. Rico, their dog, sure loves it!

The mood of the room changed for about 30 minutes while we ate Oreo cookies and cream ice cream, my favorite! It brought back many good childhood memories. They were memories of before Joshy was born. I know that sounds terrible and I hate that it is true, but my family freaked out when we found out he had downs and it has left extra stress ever since. Even though that's the last thing Joshy, himself, needs.

Suddenly, we got off into jokes and old camping stories and the time when Lydia took her first steps. I just watched Mrs. Parker... I mean Susan, talk with her hands with such joy and love and gratefulness that she make it through the storms of life. There was just something about her that attracted me. Something that made me want to be

like that. I couldn't tell you exactly what it was, but there was something there that I was going to find someday.

We all had finished the ice cream and Susan challenged us to a game of Uno. She dealt to us and then put some music on. At the parker's I felt right at home, while as I said earlier my house was just a house to me. Of course this fun could never last. Just then there was a knock at the door. I didn't think much of it at the time, but I hadn't even told my family that I wasn't coming home for dinner. Sure enough, there through the window was the last thing that I wanted to see: My mother's car.

## Chapter 5

I slowly got up out of my seat to answer the knocking. I opened up the door and to my surprise and relief; it was my dad, not my mom. Of the two, he was a little more understanding, or actually it was more that he didn't care so he would just let things slide.

"Jules, you know the rules, when you aren't coming home you at least need to let your mother or myself know. Okay?"

"Yeah, I know. Sorry." I looked at him and then because of the awkwardness just asked, "Why do you have mom's car?"

"Um... we had a little misunderstanding and, well... Anyway, I need you to come with me now. Do you need to get any of your stuff?" he asked. What does he mean a "misunderstanding?" That doesn't answer my question at all! I had mixed feelings I really didn't want to leave the Parker's, but I also didn't want to directly disrespect my dad in front of Susan and Lydia so I nodded my head and said,

"I'll be right out." At that he turned around to go get in the car and I ran back to the kitchen to get my backpack.

"It is always really nice having you over." Said Susan, "I'll be praying for you and the journey of proving yourself innocent that you are about to embark on."

I thought about that for a second. I believed her. I believed that she would pray. And that somehow comforted me. "Alright, thank you so much Susan." I said as I gave her a hug. And then I turned to Lydia and said, "See you Monday." she smiled and said,

"I love you Jules!"

"I love you too!" I replied and the best part was that I truly meant it, it wasn't just a "farewell saying" I meant it completely.

As I ran out the door and to the car I thought about it hard for a second. What does love mean? I wish that I had love for my family like Lydia and Susan clearly have for each other. My thoughts were forced to switch gears when I jumped into the car.

"We're going to see a lawyer that I know to talk to him about the happenings of yesterday." My dad said as we drove off.

"We are?" I said, "So, you believe me, you believe that I didn't do it."

"I just can't see you doing something like that... ever, but I AM wondering why you gave the officer your sister's assignment." He said.

"It's a long story." I replied.

"Well, I truly want you to not go to juvy. Don't you think that's very fatherly of me?" he said with a slight sarcastic smile.

"Mmhm."

Then he got a phone call from work and our conversation was over. He was ALWAYS working. Even when he

was at home he was either replying to emails on his blackberry or talking to people on the phone. I get sick of it some times, but most of the time it is nice because I can just relax.

As we drove I thought about what I was going to say to the lawyer. I guess I've had practice at explaining my case because of telling Susan and Lydia in the past 2 hours. But isn't a lawyer different? I guess I'll just have to see when we get there.

We drove for about 15 more minutes. My dad on his cell phone and I just thinking, but as we turned off the highway I could tell by the tone of his voice that my dad was trying to wrap things up from his call. When he got off of his phone it was always a pretty good indicator that we were almost wherever we were going.

"You ready?" he asked me in a monotone voice as we pulled into the SIMON AND SONS LAW FIRM parking lot. I was definitely getting the impression that my dad didn't REALLY want to do this for me, but he also didn't want me to be sent to juvy, so he was taking it on as a duty.

"Um... I guess I am as ready as I'll ever be." I replied. I was trying to act positive and thankful that my

dad would help me out by getting me an attorney, but I was still a little nerve wracked.

I mean, before today I had never stood up to an adult in my life (okay, not very many adults. I had stood up to my parents a few times). Still, simply asking Principal Kennedy to watch the tape was a big step for me. Now, this... this was a whole different ball game. The feelings that bombarded me reminded me of jumping of the high dive for the first time ever. New... Mysterious... Scary, yet somehow exciting.

We parked and got out of the car. As we walked up to the front door my heart felt like it was literally pumping up in my throat and my palms were dripping with sweat, almost like I had just washed my hands. The building itself wasn't intimidating at all, but it was the fact that one man inside the building was going to have to prove me innocent, or I would be unfairly charged as GUILTY.

My dad opened the door for me as any good father would and I reluctantly walked through the threshold. The little waiting room smelled musty and the light was dim. It honestly made the hairs on my back stand up for a moment.

The lady at the front desk was comforting. She looked as if she was in her twenties and was dressed in very

professional attire. My dad inquired about our appointment, and then she led us back through a doorway and into an office. The little tag next to the door read: Gerald Simon. Hmmm... Gerald, what a peculiar name.

"Hello there!" the man sitting at the desk said with a over-friendly grin as we walked into the office. I'm guessing this man was Gerald. I was so surprised at the way he conducted himself that I lost my bearings for a second.

"Hi Mr. Simon." My dad said.

"Oh PLEASE, Mr. Simon is my father, just call me Gerald." Gerald said. His mannerisms were so welcoming and genuine. He tilted his head to the right a little bit and winked at me. Most of my nervousness, but not all, disappeared.

"Well, then, Gerald, My daughter needs to speak with you about some misunderstandings that happened yesterday. I know that you deal with this kind of stuff all of the time and I'm not worried."

He sounded like he wasn't staying. Was he really going to leave me in here with this man... alone?! I needed his support.

"Alright, I guess we can get started..." he said, but I interrupted him by asking my dad a question.

"Dad, you're staying with me... right?"

"Um... sweetheart, I have to meet with another lawyer about... other stuff, right now." He replied.

I didn't dare say it out loud but in my head repeated the question, WHAT OTHER STUFF? WHAT OTHER STUFF? WHAT OTHER STUFF COULD POSSIBLY BE MORE IMPORTANT THAN ME? I had no time to think deep into that, because Gerald was patiently waiting for me to give him my undivided attention. I had no choice but trust that my dad had a good reason to leave me.

I quickly turned my thoughts back on WHY I was here, and tried to not think about why my dad was here and just focus on the job at hand.

"Would you like a soda and a snack before we get into the deep stuff?" he asked with a warm smile.

"Actually, that sounds really good." I replied thinking to myself how nice this guy, Gerald, was, at least he wasn't like Officer Guarst. "Do you have Sprite?"

"Yes Ma'am!" he replied as he handed me a can from his mini fridge and tossed me a bag of cheese crackers. He was a very animated guy and reminded me somewhat of a 10 year old with wonderful manners. "Okay, just shoot it to me from the beginning girl." He said.

I gave him the whole story and he seemed truly interested. Not just because it was his job, but because he WANTED to help. His eyes were intrigued the whole time as he shifted them from me to his paper when he was writing down notes. It definitely made me feel more comfortable while talking to him, because I felt like he had my best in mind. I didn't even feel that way when talking to my parents. Yes, you could just say that I was beginning to like this guy... Gerald.

"So, they took you into a room for questioning... ALONE? Without a parent or legal guardian or at least a woman officer?" He asked absolutely appalled.

"Yes sir, that's what happened. I mean they didn't do anything to me and one of the officers was really nice, but all in all it made me uncomfortable." I replied.

We went on to talk about other things in a little more depth and so that I could tell him details like the court date. There was a break in our talking and he bent down and simply wrote. After a while he just asked me,

"Julia, so you are telling me that you did NOT even go near that building at 75<sup>th</sup> and Fremont St. yesterday... at all?"

"I didn't, I tell ya. I promise." I said looking him straight in the eyes and keeping my focus.

"Okay, I believe you honey, but I just have to ask that question so that I don't get in trouble, does that make sense?" he said smirking.

"Mmmhm." I replied.

"Well, I am done with you today, except I need to tell you this one last thing." He said.

"What?"

"As we try our hardest to prove you innocent you cannot tell anyone of our latest findings. This is safer for you and I and in the end will pay off. Do I make myself clear?" He said forcefully, but still with kindness in his tone.

"Yeah, I get it." I said.

At that he wrote a few last things down and then opened the door and led me to the waiting room.

"See you soon, Julia." He said. "I'll call you in a couple of days when I get our side of the story finalized and all. Does that sound alright?"

"That sounds great!" I replied.

I walked into that waiting room feeling like a huge weight had been lifted off of my shoulders. I knew that there was still a whole lot of work to do, but now I knew

that I had someone to help me: Gerald Simon. And I trusted him, which was a HUGE deal for me.

I waited there in the musty room for about 15 minutes waiting for my dad and when he came out he didn't seem like he was in a very good mood. My mind quickly backtracked to earlier when he said he had to meet with a lawyer about "OTHER STUFF." I now intended to find out what that other stuff was.

He motioned for me to follow him out the door and like a little lost puppy, I did. It was already dark outside, we had been in that office for about 2 hours I'm guessing. We got into the car and the clock read 10 pm. WOAH! I didn't know that it was that late. My mind very speedily turned back to what I wanted to find out.

"Dad, what 'other stuff' did you have to talk to the lawyer about?" I asked. The dimness of the lighting made it very hard for me to see his facial expression. I could see the outline, but not quite identify what he was feeling, like I normally could.

We sat in silence for a few moments and then I realized that he wasn't answering my question.

"Don't you think I have a right to know?" I pleaded. He glanced over at me and must have noticed how much I

wanted to know because then reluctantly he cleared his throat like he does whenever he's nervous.

"Juila May, I don't know how to put this in good terms, but since you are so adamant to know..." he paused and pounded the steering wheel a few times, obviously trying to muster up the UMPH to get the words out. "Your mother and I are getting a divorce."

## Chapter 6

A feeling as though a huge hole had formed in my stomach grasped me. I looked over at my dad and then out the window and then now knowing what else to do, I just turned my head and started starring my dad down. Could he be serious? This would definitely be "other stuff" worth seeing a lawyer about I suppose. I could tell that he was keeping his gaze ahead of him for the independent reason to not look me in the eyes. It felt as though my throat was completely sealed up, but still I tried to force sound out.

"What did you say?" I... well croaking is about all that can describe what those words sounded like. Almost like a toad asking my dad this question. And I was a very small, insignificant frog at that.

"You heard me dear." He paused to lick his lips and shake his head a little almost as if he had shivers. I know that I sure did. "Your mother and I have agreed to separate."

"Why?" I blurted out. At that word I felt like I had emotion up to my neck and at any given second it was all going to come exploding out and knocking down anyone and everyone in sight. I held back the water reservoirs that were forming behind my eyelids by closing them. And my hand reached up to wipe the snot that was already trying to escape and run right out of my nose.

"Jules do NOT tell me you didn't see this coming." He said trying to keep back his emotion and doing a lot better at it than I.

The truth was I HAD seen it coming, but I had refused to believe that MY parents would just be a statistic. Or that I would simply be a child of a statistic. That just like the rest of the world my parents weren't mature enough to work things out or willing to even try. I saw all the stages: My dad moving to the couch, my dad referring to my mom as "your mother" all the time, cold awkward silences at the dinner table, but NO not in all of those signs did I

open my eyes to see what would happen if they really decided that they were through.

My dad probably realized that I wasn't going to respond to his last comment and like every decent father he added, "It is not your fault. It is not Tara's fault. And it is definitely not Joshy's fault."

"Then whose fault is dad? Who are you trying to blame? MOM? Well mom is probably just trying to blame you when really it's probably equally BOTH of your faults." I didn't know if what I had just said had made sense to him, but it made sense to ME. I knew how these situations worked. I watch TV, I go to public school, and my best friend has been through all of the dirt. I am NOT stupid. The deep down truth is, Joshy caused tension and that tension built and built and it was only time that would show when it would let loose and tear my parents apart.

"You don't even know what you're talking about." My dad replied.

"Yes, yes dad! I do. Couldn't you and mom at least try to go to counseling first?" I pleaded.

"I don't think that's an option." He said.

The rest of the ride home was filled with silence. Not the peaceful silence of a daddy and daughter getting home

from spending the evening together. A silence that was awkward and tight and dark. I felt like I could just bust out crying at any second and I could tell by my father's shifting positions that he was feeling uncomfortable too.

I think that as we pulled into our driveway we were both relieved that the ride was over and worried of what was to happen once we stepped into the doorway of our house. It was the weirdest thing though, as we parked and got out of the car the light on the front porch turned off and it had just been on.

Without saying a word my dad and I walked up the front steps and knocked. I could see a silhouette sitting on the living room couch through the window. I was positive it was my mom, but she showed no sign of answering the door. After waiting in the dark for a few chilly minutes, my dad fished around in his pocket for his keys and once he had them out proceeded to try to find the RIGHT one, which was very hard to do without the porch light.

I felt like I was in a movie or in a comic strip as I began to realize how childish my parents were acting. It all hit me at once. My dad had driven my mother's car just to aggravate her and in return my mom was purposefully not answering the door and the porch light had "mysteriously"

turned off as we drove up. This was absolutely ridiculous and I could just imagine what the next few weeks will look like as one of them goes through the process of moving out. I wonder which one it will be.

Finally, he got the door unlocked and let me step in first. My mother didn't even acknowledge my presence and looked straight at my dad in furry.

"Why in the world did you TAKE MY CAR, Mark?" She fumed.

"Why did you lock us out?" He replied.

They exchanged a few more, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade "comeback" remarks and then turned and looked at me as if wanting my support. Well they weren't going to get it. That's for sure.

"Um... you two are so immature!" was all that I could muster out of my mouth.

They both turned and looked at me with a look of unbelief on their faces.

"Jules..." My dad began to say.

"That's right. I said that. If you two would just get your act together maybe we COULD be a family again!" I screamed. Realising that I had reacted a little too rashly I calmly turned and walked upstairs, not wanting to be apart of all the nonsense that was being exchanged between

my kid parents, but I could hear them go at it for a while. After about 10pm downstairs quieted down and I guessed that they got tired and decided to go to bed.

I thought that I should do the same, but before that I sent a Facebook message to Lydia explaining the happenings of the evening and asking if she was interested in going down to the building site with me tomorrow. I wanted to see the place that I was accused of burning down. Wouldn't you? And I also wanted to escape this little new reality called: divorce. It took me a while to fall asleep because my mind was so many places all at once, but finally I did and I dreamed of Principal Kennedy testifying against me at my court trial. SCARY!

My goal the next morning was to get out of the house preferably without being seen, but in the least without being spoken to. I got on the computer to see if Lydia had replied and to my relief, she had. It said:

"JULES, WOAHA, I CANNOT BELIEVE THAT. I AM SO SORRY ABOUT YOUR PARENTS... LET'S TALK ABOUT THAT TOMORROW. UH... YEAH, I WILL SO GO WITH YOU TO THE BUILDING SITE TOMORROW. JUST COME OVER TO MY HOUSE WHENEVER YOU GET UP. I MIGHT STILL BE SLEEPING BUT JUST WAKE ME UP. HAHA. OKAY, I LOVE

YOU JULIA. SEE YOU SOON AND WE'LL CRACK THIS CASE  
TOGETHER!!! YOUR FRIEND, LYDIA."

That relieved me so much. I was hoping that she would say come on over, she usually did. I brushed my teeth and slipped some clothes on really fast and then trying to be as quiet as possible walked downstairs. Let's just say that I was, in face, SEEN and SPOKEN to. Go figure!

"Jules, come in here for a sec." hollered my mother from the kitchen. She was the last person I wanted to talk to, but being a good obedient little girl, I made my feet step toward the kitchen.

"What do you need?" I asked once I was standing in the hallway.

"Oh, I just wanted to talk to you." She said as she put a bowl of oatmeal in front of Joshy.

"About..." I said, trying to get this conversation over with.

"You know... life." She replied. I chuckled at that and she heard me and whipped her head up to look at me. I immediately quieted myself.

"Okay, well..." I paused and then decided that if she wanted to talk about 'LIFE' then we were going to talk about what was burning in my soul. I took a deep breath in

and another deep breath out and then began again. "Don't you think a divorce is selfish?"

Once she heard what I said I could tell that her body tensed up. I guess that I didn't think about the fact that Joshy was in the room and he probably didn't know and was going to probably be lied to about the whole divorce. She seemed flustered but swiftly grabbed my arm and pulled me into the next room.

"Did your father tell you that we were getting a divorce?" She fumed.

"Well, he told me that you two were separating... SAME THING." I said.

"First of all, I do NOT appreciate that you announced that in front of Joshy. And second of all," She paused to catch her breath. "It's not of your business."

"I do believe that it IS my business! It's my FAMILY!" I replied.

We both turned at the sound of Joshy singing. I could barely make it out but after listening for a while I could tell that he was singing, "There's no business like show business."

Him singing that proved that he could definitely hear out conversation. For his sake I tried to end the

conversation by saying, "Mom I don't care what you do with your life, okay? Just realize that it affects us kids too. I have to go meet up with Lydia, but I'll see you later."

She let go of my arm that she had been clutching since she pulled me out of the kitchen and her eyes got really big and then she composed herself once more.

"That's fine Julia, but I need you to take Joshy with you today. I have errands to run." She said.

"No way!" was my first response, but after I thought about it, I would rather him be with me than with either one of my parents right now. I said, "Never mind, I'll take him with me mom."

"Josh, you're going to hang out with your sister today." My mom said as we walked back into the kitchen.

"YESSSSSSSSSSSSSS!!!" Joshy yelled as he jumped out of his chair and ran over to me to give me a big hug.

Well, I guess the rest of the day would be a little different, but Lydia will be happy that Josh gets to tag along.

## **Chapter 7**

We drove over to Lydia's and picked her up. While we were there her mom gave us each our own fresh blueberry muffin for the road. It was yummy!

"Where exactly are we going Jules?" Lydia asked.

"We're going to the abandoned building a few blocks away from the one that was burned down to see if there is anyone around that may know of kids that hang out there." I replied.

"That sounds a bit dangerous... don't you think?" she said in a soft voice so that only I could hear. "You know we do have your little brother with us..." she continued.

"We'll be fine. I don't see a problem with it. I mean we aren't going to the building that WAS burned down to leave any indication that I was there, but we just might be able to find out some clues from the people around." I said, trying to be convincing. Truthfully, I was just trying to do SOMETHING. Something that would clear my name, but blaming it on whoever really did it. She seemed satisfied and that conversation was over.

"Are we there yet?" Joshy groaned. He didn't like driving very much. He would much rather be running or jumping around. He's always been an active little guy.

"No buddy, but we'll be there pretty soon, okay?" I said.

I turned up the music and the rest of the ride was pretty calm and silent. I love that Lydia and I are good

enough friends where silence isn't awkward... it's peaceful and comfortable.

As we drove through town I parked and it was a little walk to the building, but not too bad. Joshy was having a wonderful old time singing under his breath and climbing on whatever benches there were along the way. And Lydia and I were just enjoying the nice weather. It was pretty warm for fall and I was loving it! It was a nice stress reliever.

"What are we looking for exactly?" Lydia asked me.

"People... to ask if they ever see anyone hanging around the old building." I replied.

There we were standing in front of the abandoned thing. Lots of the windows were boarded up. Some weren't covered by anything. The door was one of those revolving ones, but I doubt it worked right anymore. I took a peek inside and there was just junk covering the floor.

"Wow, this place is old!" Joshy said.

"Yeah, Jules... this place is a little creepy. Let's get on with your search and then go home." She said. She was always the more cautious one. Down the street a little ways was a hair salon and I thought that there might be someone in there that could give me some answers.

"Come on guys, I want to go over to that place."

"Okay." Lydia said seeming a little bit happier now that I had my focus away from the old building.

A little bell rang as we walked into the salon. A woman in a pink apron and who had way too much make-up on her face walked up to us.

"Y'all need anything?" She asked.

"Actually, I was wondering if I could ask you a question." I said.

"Sure thing precious..." she replied.

"Okay, well I was wondering if you have ever seen anyone hanging around that old building."

"You know. Actually sweet heart, I have, but I don't know who the scoundrels are."

"Are they about my age?" I asked.

"Yeah, probably, I mean, I've never had a good look at 'em, but I'm guessing." She paused to think and then continued, "Actually, come to think of it... they're usually hanging around on Saturday, like today. Why are you interested in them honey?"

"Oh, well it's a long story." I said, not really wanting to get into the details, "But thanks for your help."

I saw Josh out of the corner of my eye reaching for the sucker jar.

"Oh, here you go little man." The lady said as she handed him a grape lolly pop.

"What do you say, Joshy?" I asked.

"Thank you miss." He obediently said.

At that we thanked her again for her help and walked out of the little salon.

"This is perfect!" I exclaimed and a huge smile spread across my face.

"What is perfect?" asked Lydia with her puzzled eyebrows.

"A clue." I exclaimed. "Now we know, or at least have a good idea, that teenagers hang out around this building and could have very well hung around the other one too."

My heart was racing and I wasn't sure why, but I wanted to get inside that building and see if the kids had left anything that I could use as proof.

"Do we get to go in that old place now?" Josh asked in an eager voice.

"Actually, yes!" I replied. I was surprised that he wanted to go.

"I guess I'm game too." Lydia inserted. She seemed to be feeling a little less tense.

I reached into my backpack and pulled out a flashlight and decided to circle around the back of the building and see if there was a door that worked back there.

"I feel like I'm in a movie!" Lydia said.

"I know... it's exciting, huh?" I replied.

"Mhm."

I think that we were all a little jumpy because all of a sudden we heard a noise and huddled together.

"What was that?" Joshy asked, not singing anymore.

"I don't know buddy, but we'll be just fine." I whispered into his ear as I held him close. Then seconds later we heard some more rustling and a cat appeared from behind a trashcan. It was a classic fake freak out because our nerves were a little on edge, so, we continued on.

When we got to the back of the building there was a door and it was cracked. *Perfect!* I thought. Once inside I turned on the flash light to look in corners and stuff. I looked back at Lydia and Joshy and they seemed fine. I motioned them to stay downstairs and look around, while I went and explored upstairs.

"This is cool!" I heard Joshy yell from downstairs.

"Hey! Whose there?" A soft voice sounded. I couldn't tell WHERE in the building it was coming from, but it seemed close. I was now separated from Lydia and Joshy which made our predicament a little scarier. I hope that they're alright, I was starting to question bringing them here. I bet that they didn't hear the voice because it wasn't very loud. Which meant they won't even know that they're in danger!

I decided to keep quiet and see what happened. My hands were shaking. But it was kind of out of excitement because this 'voice' might have a clue to my mystery. I was also beginning to realize that I definitely should have listened to Lydia and waited for another time to come so to NOT take Josh along on this adventure.

I slowly made my way back downstairs to join Lydia and Josh. I tried my hardest not to make a sound and I believe that I succeeded pretty well in doing so because I was the one who heard them.

"What is your little brother doing here?" the same voice as before whispered.

"I don't know... and I don't know why he's here with my sister's friend." Another voice said softly. It was a voice

that sounded a lot like MY SISTER. Questions were pounding through my whole body, still I kept silent.

"If your brother and Julia's friend are here, then it only makes sense that your sister is here too." The first voice said. It sounded like they were underneath the staircase I was standing on.

"I bet!" Tara said surprised.

I couldn't believe this. What was my sister doing in an old building? And that other voice must be her boyfriend. Oh my... I just wanted to get out of there as fast as possible!

"Where is she?" Tara's boyfriend asked. I couldn't for the life of me remember his name.

"I don't know... around here somewhere." Tara replied. "Let's wait a little while to see if she shows and then go looking for her. Why do you think she's here" Tara asked.

"Duh... to cover her back. Since you blamed her for the building that we burned down she's probably trying to find the kids that did it." He giggled under his breath at that.

"That's not funny." Tara fumed in a quiet voice. "If she figures out it was me..."

"She won't." He said, still whispering. "I've got a plan."

OH no! A plan?! A plan to do WHAT? I was starting to panic! I wiped sweat off of my forehead and my hands were shaking. But what did she say? SHE'S THE ONE WHO BURNED THE OTHER BUILDING DOWN?! I couldn't believe it. Oh my. Now what was I to do? Turn her in even though she's my sister? I leaned up against the wall to prop myself up because of the faint feeling my head was getting.

I had to change my trail of thought for the time being. I was sort of trapped right above their heads. If I moved it could prove disastrous. I could hear Lydia and Joshy faintly a little way off, probably just exploring, but how was I supposed to get to them without being seen or even better yet... HEARD? I needed to come up with MY OWN little plan and fast... very very fast.

Frozen on the steps I decided to text Lydia to tell her to get out of the building with Joshy. Reaching in my pocket I remembered that I had accidentally left it at home. *What a perfect time forget something like that, Julia!* I thought. Then once again I heard the voices under me.

"Follow my lead." He said.

*What was that supposed to mean?* I thought. It could mean ANYTHING. All of a sudden I heard Joshy's voice and it sounded like he was coming closer to the staircase.

"Jules! Oh Jules! WHERE ARE YOU? I'M GONNA FIND YOU SISSY!" he repeated over and over.

My insides were squirming. I would definitely risk anything to make sure he was safe, but it actually brought me a little comfort that it was just my sister and her boyfriend and they probably (I say 'probably' because you never know for sure with her) won't do anything to him, at least. Then I heard Lydia.

"Josh... stick with me kiddo." And by the sound of it she was walking straight into the trap as well. I wanted to scream, but fear paralyzed me. I wanted to call 911, but I had no phone. I wanted to save the day, but I didn't know where to start. I had never really been the hero type. I heard them approach closer and closer and also heard some rustling underneath the stairs.

"Stop! Lydia... Joshy... run!" At that I decided to run for it too, but my efforts didn't get me very far. I tripped on the second to last step and landed flat on my face. I was a little dizzy, but know that I was fine.

Suddenly I heard Lydia very close, "What did you say?" she asked.

I slowly lifted my head, "RUN!" I repeated hoping that it wasn't too late.

My wish didn't come true. Tara's HUGE boyfriend jumped out and grabbed Lydia's arms and pinned her against the wall. She gasped out of pain and everything in my body hurt for getting her into this mess. I felt horrible! Josh listened to me though and was OFF running. I was so happy that at least he was going to get away.

"Joshy, Come here!" Tara said loudly and firmly as she stepped out from under the staircase. Feelings of anger were rising up inside of me. My sister was about to manipulate our downs syndrome brother. "If you don't come here right this second I will tell mom."

There was quite a pause and then he started walking back. I saw the torn look in his face as our eyes locked for a few split seconds. He then drooped his head and walked sheepishly over to Tara.

Pretty much simultaneously all four people looked at me in my same position lying on the ground at the bottom of the stairs. I couldn't figure out what to do or say.

"Hurry, put them in here." Tara's boyfriend said. I still couldn't remember his name. He opened up a closet and flung Lydia and Joshy in there closed the door and locked it. They both immediately started screaming.

I thought about trying to bust my way through the closet door to let Lydia and Joshy out but then I would get put in there WITH them by Tara's boyfriend. I realized that this was the perfect opportunity for me to run to get help... So I turned and started running up the stairs and Tara's boyfriend was right after me. What started out as an exciting adventure had turned into a big big mess! And it was all MY fault.

## Chapter 8

I ran up the stairs and thought that maybe there was another flight of stairs down that I could find. All I could focus on was running and getting help for my brother and my best friend. I didn't care who was chasing me. I didn't care about the mistakes I had just made. I just needed to make good decisions from now on. I looked back behind me and realized that Tara's boyfriend wasn't chasing me anymore. I was a little confused, but grateful.

So I slowed and started thinking more about HOW to get back down to the main floor. Not being able to find another staircase I turned back around to go the way I came.

Suddenly smoke filled my nose. It consumed me. What was this? Why was there smoke? FIRE! THIS BUILDING WAS ON FIRE! It all began to click. This was a trap. They wanted me to run so that they could set the building on fire and then blame me. Tara had probably will call 911 momentarily. Even with those thoughts racing through my head, I was overwhelmed with the fact that I simply HAD to get out of this burning building.

Finally I made it to the stairs and although they were wood and on fire. WHAT WAS I GOING TO DO?! I think that I've seen a little too many movies, but I decided to just jump. Yes, jump. I stepped on the first step and swung myself over the hand rail to drop down. OUCH! The metal bar was so hot! I looked down... BAD IDEA... but having no other choice I let go of the roasting bar and let myself drop. It wasn't that far... 20 feet or so, but I landed on my ankle wrong and could feel and HEAR the... POP! Ahhh... I could feel the pain all the way up my leg and it was almost unbearable. I felt tears trying to get free from exhaustion and frustration. I was gasping for each breath.

Now how was I going to get Lydia and Joshy free? They were probably running out of air, I was and I wasn't in a closet. Oh my gosh! I heard coughing and wheezing coming from the closet and I remembered that Lydia has asthma. What was I going to do? In between the closet door and I were flames. And I couldn't stand on my ankle so I decided the best thing to do would be to try to get myself out and tell the fireman that they were locked in the closet so that they could do their job. I was breathing so heavily that I could barely think straight.

As I stood up on one foot and proceeded to hop toward the nearest exit I cried out to God. I don't really know God, but now seemed a good time to acknowledge him. If there is a God then hopefully he can help me right now. I prayed, "God if you are there, please help me. I don't know what else to do." And let's just say that I was screaming this prayer at the top of my lungs. I tripped on something and fell on my face about 30 feet from the door. Pulling myself back up again and gasping for air, I looked around and obviously Tara's boyfriend had lit more than one area of the building on fire and the floor looked like there was gasoline poured outlining the walls. How did he do it that

fast? Unless, he was planning it before Lydia, Joshy, and I ever showed up. I couldn't believe this!

To my relief I made it to the revolving front door and pushed with all the strength that I had, but it was bared closed. Then faintly I heard a siren. Then another. Yes! That meant HELP was on the way. But I still needed to try to get free. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a window. It was boarded up, but the boards looked flimsy and I thought that maybe I could rip them off. The fire hadn't gotten to this area quite yet.

One... two... three... I yanked at one. YES! It came off. One... two... three... I pulled on the other one and it ripped off. Smelling the fresh air was so refreshing to my body and spirit. I started to yell. Yelling as loud as I could hoping that SOMEONE would hear me as I tried to pull myself over the window ledge. It was almost in slow motion as I fell. BAM! My body made contact with the ground and I felt a sharp pain in my ankle that was wedged under the rest of my body. It was further than I expected, but I was just grateful that I was out of the building.

Running toward me were two men, they appeared to be firemen, because they were wearing a fireman suits. Kneeling beside me he looked at me with his huge blue eyes

and asked if there was anyone else in the building. Not really knowing if I could speak after all of the trauma I had just been through I tried to sit up and clear my throat. My head and ankle were throbbing.

"Yes, two... in the closet." I finally forced out.

He looked at his partner and then back at me.

"We'll be back sweet heart, help is coming for you."

He said.

Then they rushed into the window that I had just jumped out of. Then there were people dressed in white suits surrounding me.

"What's your name?" one of them asked.

"Julia May Mosby." I replied.

They proceeded to lift me up onto what felt like a stretcher. I thought about fighting it, but didn't have the energy. I suddenly got very dizzy and threw up all over myself and the people in white suits that were carrying me.

My eyes opened and I shut them gently again because the light was overwhelming. Where was I? What was I doing in bed? Then I thought really hard about the happenings of the day and opened my eyes again to realize that I was in a hospital bed and I could feel pain in my ankle but it was

stiff. It was in a cast. I must have lost consciousness because being carried on a stretcher was the last thing that I can remember.

"Oh, Jules... you're awake! I am so glad that you're okay." exclaimed a familiar voice. I turned my head to see who it was and saw my dad and my sister. Yes, the sister that burned, or at least helped burn down the building. The sister that locked MY brother... HER brother... OUR brother in a closet with my best friend. I could feel my body tense up as I stared at her in the eyes. I squeezed the blanket that was covering me to keep my emotions contained.

Yeah, that sister was glad that I was okay? I was utterly confused, but couldn't think about that too much longer because soon a nurse was asking me questions like "What's your name?"; "When's your birthday?"; "What's your favorite food?" And all of that jazz.

After my memory check-up I had to have a turn to ask a question.

"Where's Lydia? Where's Joshy? Are they okay?" I asked.

The nurse came over to my bedside and I could tell she was trying to put on a good face.

"The boy is stabilized and will be okay. He has some

1<sup>st</sup> degree burns and a few second degree ones, but he will be just fine."

It would have been nice to feel relief after that news, but I didn't because I shouldn't have brought him to the building in the first place. Wait... she didn't say anything about Lydia.

"What about Lydia?" I asked. I could tell by the look on her face that things were not as peachy as Josh's turned out to be. I glanced at Tara and she had her head on my dad's shoulder tearing up, I couldn't believe this character change.

"Tara, well... right now she's in a coma and we think that it's because she was having an asthma attack and her body couldn't get enough air so it just went into hibernate mode for a while. She has a little worse burns than the boy, but hopefully she'll come back to us soon." She said and paused, "Okay, I'll be back to check on you. Be still and relax." And then she walked out of the room. I couldn't handle all of this bad news at once, but more was coming.

"Honey, the police think that you burned down the building and I still do not believe them but... we really need to be clear with eachother, alright?" He said and I could tell that it was very hard for him to say those

words. But that was well felt because I AM HIS daughter and he should believe me.

"Dad, I didn't. I promise I didn't." Emotion filled my body and I felt like exploding. Then I looked at Tara and I realized something. No one would believe me if I told them the truth. No one. Not my dad, not the police, plus... I simply could not try to turn my sister in jail. She had threatened to make sure that Lydia was killed if I even tried to prove her guilty.

This was quite a predicament. I decided not to tell and to just see what happens and what the police think that the story is. I was realizing that I CAN'T control everything and I FAIL, but so does everybody. I just wish my failure hadn't put Josh and Lydia in danger to. Oh Lydia, I hope she's alright.

"We believe you didn't do it." Tara said in her fake character. I just couldn't take her seriously.

My dad got a phone call and walked out of the room and Tara's mask went with him. That could be a good or a bad thing depending on how you look at it.

"So, you better not rat on me. You hear?! Because if you do YOU KNOW that I will have you sorry very soon. Your

little friend Lydia, yes... she would be gone." She said forcefully.

Very freaked out at her repeated threats, but trying to keep my mind on the point that I needed to get across.

"Why did you do it?" I asked.

She looked at me and then quickly looked away.

"Why did you do it... twice?" I asked.

"Because... I just... Oh, Jules, you wouldn't understand." She said raising her voice.

"Try me." I stated plainly.

"No." she replied.

"Okay, you don't have to tell me why you burned down buildings, but why did you make it look like I DID? Am I just your little rag doll that you can blame everything on?"

I knew already that she hated confrontation, but I thought this was the perfect place for it. I was in a HOSPITAL bed. She couldn't do anything stupid or someone would definitely know that it was her.

"Julia, you'll never amount to anything. I'm just trying to help you get to the point of your life faster than you'd get to it on your own." She said.

Sometimes what she said did hurt. But not today. I had gone through way too much to let her make ME believe that it was MY fault.

"I don't believe that anymore. I know that I've failed... a lot, but I'm tired of listening and believing what you say about me." I tried to sound confident as I said it.

I couldn't really read her facial expression. She was surprised yes, but not angry. I can't explain it. It was weird, but I knew that I wasn't going to get an apology or anything of that sort. She turned around without a word and walked out the door.

I lay there for about 20 minutes thinking about what just happened. I tried to confront my sister. I JULIA MAY had tried to confront my sister. And I also decided in that 20 minutes not to tell... yet. I wanted the truth about the buildings to win out, but I want to wait until we're in court, sworn into honesty, with people watching and proof. Until then I was just going to keep quiet.

"Hello in there." A voice said from behind the cracked door.

"Come in." I replied.

In stepped Mrs. Parker. Her face stained with tears, yet she still seemed calm.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm fine. My ankle hurts a little, but I think it's okay."

"I'm glad to hear it. I was so worried about you."

I couldn't handle this small talk. I felt so guilty. Her daughter, her one and only family member at home is in a coma and it's because I brought her into a dangerous situation.

"I'm so sorry. I just... I didn't mean to..." but I couldn't get the words out before she interrupted me.

"Stop! Julia it's not your fault. Lydia is going to be fine. God is faithful."

How could she say that? How could she believe that? I didn't understand it and I don't think that I'll ever understand it completely. I would have asked her those questions but just then a nurse came in.

"The doctor wants to take one more x-ray of that ankle so I'm going to have to borrow you for a while." The nurse said.

"Okay." I replied.

"Bye Julia, I have to go back to Lydia's room anyway, but I'll talk to you soon. Keep your chin up." She said as she winked at me. "It's not your fault." She repeated.

I think that I was starting to believe it. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. Was all that I could think about as they rolled me down to the x-ray room. I was just trying to convince myself that it wasn't my fault.

## Chapter 9

They took an x-ray and concluded that my ankle was set just fine and gave me the run down on how to stay off of it and all. After that they wheeled me back to my room.

"Well, when a parent or guardian shows up you are free to go home." Said the nurse.

"Awesome." I replied. "What about my brother and my friend?" I asked.

"We need to keep your brother here overnight just to make sure he continues to stay stabilized. And you friend... well, she hasn't woken up from her coma yet, so she will defiantly be staying here."

Worries circled around my brain: What if she dies? What will I do? Who will I be? I just cannot even imagine seeing Mrs. Parker upset. Ahh... I just but I pushed the

worries to the side the best that I could to be strong.

"Can I see them?" I asked.

"You certainly can once a parent or guardian arrives to take you."

"Alright, Thank you." I said.

She looked at me surprised that I would say thank you in such a hard time. But the truth was I was trying to act positive on the outside, even though on the inside I was a mess.

"You're welcome." She replied, smiling as she walked out of the room.

Not too long after the nurse had told me that I was free to go home, my mom appeared through the doors. I hadn't seen her since the whole burning building ordeal and I was trying to figure out whether I was happy to see her or worried. Maybe a little bit of both.

Once I saw her face I definitely started leaning towards the worried side of things. It was red and splotchy like she and I get when we cry hard and her eyes were very bloodshot. She looked upset, almost mad, and I wasn't sure if I should say something or let her be the one to initiate the conversation. I could tell that whatever did finally come out of her mouth when she was in this emotional state

wouldn't be well thought through. So, I went ahead and spoke up.

"Hey mom, thanks for coming." I said.

She wouldn't look me in the eye, instead she gazed out the window.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

At that she snapped her head towards me and our eyes met and locked. Her jaw clenched and I swear that her ears had red steam coming out of them.

"How could you do this?"

"It wasn't my fault, mom. I promise" I pleaded, remembering what Mrs. Parker had repeated to me earlier that afternoon.

My mom started laughing. A fake, annoying, creepy laugh, almost sounding like she was drunk.

"Not your fault? What? It's not your fault?" She paused to think about what she would say next and then continued, "It is your fault. It IS YOUR FAULT. It is your fault that my little boy has burns all over his body. It's your fault that our insurance is going to have to pay a boatload of money to clean up the mess you made when you burned down the..."

I interrupted her, "MOM! Believe me, I didn't burn down the building." Our voices were getting a little louder with every word that we said.

"Let me finish!" She said in between sobs. She was full out crying again. "You are lying straight to my face! Your whole life is a lie! My boy... my boy... you hurt my boy." She fell to her knees crying and continued ranting and raving in between cries.

By now I was also in tears. I knew somewhere deep down that what she was saying wasn't true, but it seemed so real. My mom was so mad... at ME for hurting Joshy, "her boy." What ever happened to me being "her girl." Did I just skip that stage or something? Didn't she realize that I felt terrible for hurting him?

"I didn't mean to. Can't you understand? I didn't mean to!" I yelled.

At that she stood up and walked over to my bed and looked at me and then down at my cast covered foot.

"No! mom..."

She punched my ankle. I let out a cry because it hurt. Even though it's in a cast it I could still feel the pain because the bone hadn't fused together yet. I couldn't believe that my mom had stooped so low to try to hurt me.

Again she hit me and again, this time saying, "I cannot believe you came from ME!" I could barely handle the pain.

Suddenly the hospital door opened and a nurse stepped in accompanied by two security guards.

"Ma'am, do not touch the girl again." One of them said as he slowly walked up to her.

"But she... she... she... hurt my boy. It's all her fault..." my mother screamed.

One of the security guards grabbed her arms firmly as she was about to hit my ankle again. I flinched at the motion of her hand.

"Calm down, ma'am, or else we are going to have escort you out of the building." The security guard that was holding my squirming mother said.

"Get off of me!" She yelled.

At that the security guard that wasn't holding on to my mom called someone on his phone and the other guard carried my screaming mother out of the room.

I was frozen. Not knowing what to do or say. The pain in my ankle was throbbing all the way up to my head and I couldn't think straight. I tried to calm myself down enough to stop crying but my mothers words were playing over and

over in my brain. Finally, after my mom was gone the nurse came over to me.

"Are you alright?" said the woman.

"I... think... so..." I muttered still trying to hold back the tears.

"Okay, well, honey we're going to have to take another x-ray of that ankle, but first I think you're going to need to answer some questions that Bill has for you." She said.

I was guessing that 'Bill' was the security guard and RIGHT I was. I had finally got my tears under control and prepared myself for the questions.

"Hi there," Bill the security guard said. His voice was deep and a little intimidating, but I tried not to think about it too much. "Was that woman your mother?"

"Yes sir." I replied.

"And she is also the mother of the boy in room 509?"

"If a little 7 year old boy named Josh is in room 509 than yes."

"He has downs syndrome, yes?" Bill asked.

"Mhm."

"Okay, well I also understand that you mom and dad have filed for a divorce. Is that correct?"

I was starting to get a little creeped out that Bill the security guard knew so much about my family, but I decided that if anyone was safe to trust it would be a security guy.

"Yes, I just found out about that yesterday," I paused to take a breath, "but I think that the process has been going on for a while." I finished.

Then another man, This man was in a suit and tie walked in the door.

"Bill, can I talk to you outside?" the man in the suit asked.

"Sure thing." Bill replied. "Why don't you go ahead and x-ray that ankle now while I clear some stuff up." Bill turned and said to the nurse.

So, she being very obedient wheeled me back into the x-ray room I had been in just about an hour before. The x-ray showed that my ankle was still set just fine, and she and I were both glad about that. She gave me some pain killer and it helped after a while.

Back into the hospital room the nurse brought me a glass of water and the two men, Bill and the man in the suit, came in, probably for more questioning. I was just

very thankful that by now my emotions were under control and I would be able to answer better.

I saw the security guard lean against the wall to wait and see if he will be needed.

"Julia, my name is Mr. Stewart and I am with child services." The man in the suit said

My heart dropped. What was he doing here? What did he want to do to me? My head started spinning with possibilities.

"Hi." I finally mustered out.

"I am just here to explain some stuff to you and I want you to not jump to conclusions about anything that I say before I give background and reasons. Alright?"

"I can try." I said trying to convince myself that I could talk to this child service man calmly and rationally.

"Well, because of the conduct that you have been charged for in burning down two buildings and taking your little disabled brother into one with you it brings question to whether it is healthy or safe to let Josh be in an environment with you."

I couldn't believe what this man was saying.

"I didn't do it!" I blurted out.

"You will have to plead your case before a judge; I can only go off of what I am told to be true." He paused to see my reaction. I tried to contain my emotions and simply listen realizing that my interruptions would not help me at all.

"Also, because of the conduct of your parents, your mom mainly with the outburst she just took out on you seems to be having their own difficulties. The fact that the two of them are already under way in a divorce worries us. It has come to the attention of the child services that Josh would probably be safer and better taken care of in a foster family's home. He needs a loving and nurturing environment, especially with the burns and the trauma that he has been through today. Does that make sense to you Julia May?"

I couldn't believe my ears. Joshy was what kept me going, knowing that he needed a role model to look up to.

"Josh is going to be taken away from us?!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, but you must realize that it's not only your fault. If your mother hadn't proceeded to act so childishly to you today then we wouldn't have seen it as such an urgent case. By the way, is your ankle alright?"

"Yes sir, it's fine" I said without any emotion. All of my emotion was IN SIDE. The realization of Josh NOT coming home with us killed me.

"When will we get him back?" I asked.

"Um... we will have to wait until the divorce is final and your court case is over and act accordingly to the outcome of both."

My court date was still almost a month away! That is such a long time for a 7 year old to be away from his family. JOSH IS GONE!? OH my goodness. I felt sweat drip down my neck because of the stress I was feeling. I imagined that boy in another family. What would the family be like? Would he like them? Would he be happy?

I felt like giving up. Like it didn't even matter if I went to jail or died right then. I started to cry... no, I started to bawl! I couldn't believe that my little brother was going to be taken away from me and everyone was blaming ME.

Just then there was a knock at the door and Mrs. Parker walked in with her hair in disarray and her face smeared with tears. I had never seen her looking like she did. She looked at the child service man and then back at me.

"She went to be with Jesus. She left me to go be with our King." She said in between tears. After getting it out she knees started to buckle and she grabbed the wall next to her.

Was she talking about LYDIA?! No way. Lydia couldn't have died. That would totally ruin everything; completely everything and it would be all because I BROUGHT her into that building. I put her in dangers way.

"What are you saying?" I screamed.

I heart Mrs. Parker start breathing faster and faster. She fell to her knees, but that must have not helped much. Then Mrs. Parker fainted and the nurse carried her out. Mr. Steward left and another nurse came in to clear up the news with me.

"Is Lydia okay? She's alive right?" I asked.

The woman paused holding back her own tears.

"Honey, she's gone."

I looked into the nurses eyes and a tear rolled down her cheek.

"I'm so sorry." She muttered. Then abruptly she shook her arm gently away from my grip and slipped out of the room.

Suddenly, I couldn't cry anymore. I couldn't feel anymore. I was shocked. Fear gripped me and I couldn't move. My whole body was trembling, but I wasn't cold.

Questions eventually started circling my brain, but at first I just sat. The pit in my stomach had grown and it was almost unbearable now. The ringing in my ears intensified. How could Mrs. Parker respond to her little girls death with little hints of hope tied in?

What had she said? Hmmm... she's gone to be with my King. How can she know that? I just don't understand.

Mini movies of Lydia played over and over in my thoughts. What was I going to do without her? She was my best friend. She was the only one who cared about ME and who I really was. She was gone and I didn't even get to say goodbye.

One week goes by...

Two weeks...

Three weeks...

## Chapter 10

Beep...Beep...Beep...Beep...Beeeeeeeeeeep... The familiar sound of my alarm filled my sleepy head. I had another day in front of me to live. I was so glad that it was Saturday! I opened my window and smelled the cool crisp air and then turned to go brush my teeth in the bathroom.

On the way I glanced at the framed picture on the wall of Lydia and I at the pool during the summer. Tears started welling up in my eyes but I didn't want to let them free.

I hadn't really cried about Lydia's death in two weeks. At first I felt completely numb to the fact that she was such a big part of my life. I felt totally dead inside. And I just pilled up my anger until there was no emotion

left. But then I saw how stupid I was being. And finally I decided to let that bitterness, that poison that I was forcing down my own throat to stop.

Sure, at first I could only think about how not having Lydia would drastically change everything in MY life, but then I wasn't thinking about Lydia at all. You see these last few weeks I've still been going to the Lydia's house after school. Even now I have been eating dinner with her mother on a regular basis. And although Mrs. Parker misses Lydia so very much, she still is keeping her faith. She is so happy that Lydia gets to be with Jesus and cannot wait to join her someday.

Well, I don't know how to put this except just to say it. I have accepted Jesus as Lord and savior in my life. Seeing that Mrs. Parker is continually filled with joy after just losing her precious little girl was so different. So attractive. So unthinkable to me that I had to ask "How?".

She gladly told me. She said that it's not about getting "better" it's about God becoming the biggest part of your life. It's about relationship with him. This sounded like exactly what I needed after losing my best

friend, my little brother, being dis-owned by my mother, and being charged with a huge crime, ect...

I prayed a prayer with her. A simple prayer. After that prayer not much changed, but one thing did. The fact that I KNOW I will see Lydia someday is wonderful. Mrs. Parker daily encourages me and gives me verses to read in the bible that she gave me. I'm far from being a perfect Christian or person, but because of accepting him I'm hoping that he can help me through this difficult time.

I've been meeting with Mr. Gerald Simon, my attorney, on a regular basis and although he thinks that he can prove me innocent it's going to be messy business because of the happenings at the second burned building. They still think that it's my fault. My court date is in one week from today and this one week hopefully will not be filled with too many surprises.

As I walked away from the picture of Lydia and I, I quickly breathed in and out while gaining my composure. I brushed my teeth and thought of how thankful I was for Mrs. Parker's influence in my life these last few weeks. I was so excited because we were going to have lunch at Panera bread today because she someone gave her a giftcard.

"Jules!" I heard a yell from downstairs. I could tell that it was Tara. I never enjoyed hearing someone yell for my name anymore because I know that it wouldn't be Joshy. I constantly wonder where he is and how he is doing. Oh how I miss him!

Tara continued to confuse me and I couldn't quite put my finger on how her character changes from person to person. In my mind I had every reason to hate her and honestly I still did. But Mrs. Parker has been encouraging me to pray for her. It's weird and different, but maybe it will help.

"Coming..." I replied. I quickly finished brushing my teeth and hurried downstairs, still in my pjs.

"There are some people here for you." Tara said coldly as she walked out of the kitchen. Ever since that Saturday three weeks ago Tara and I haven't really gotten along. I don't really want to. I mean, how could we? She blamed me for her stupidity, malice, and attempted MURDER... TWICE.

Anyway, Tara motioned me into the kitchen, but then walked away. Slowly I put one foot in front of the other. I didn't know who it could be... here for me. Maybe it was Gerald.

Well, let's just say that it was certainly not Gerald sitting at the table. It was the Officer Gharst. The man started this cycle of trouble for me in the first place.

"So, we meet again." He said awkwardly, probably feeling uncomfortable that I was still in my pajamas, I sure was.

"Hi, what are you here for?" I asked plainly.

"Well, we've got a lot to talk about and I have been given instruction to take you down to the station... again. But you might want to get dressed first." He replied.

What could this be for? I couldn't figure it out. My court day was in one week and they still have to come after me with police and junk.

"Okay." I said. "I'll run up to change and be right back. Would you like some water or coffee while you wait?" I asked.

"No thanks." He replied.

So I tried to smile and then left the the awkwardness at least for a little while. When I got to my room I checked my phone and there was one missed call and a message. It was probably Mrs. Parker, so I checked. Right I was. I almost listened to the message but then I decided to just go ahead and call her back to tell her that lunch

probably wasn't going to work out today. Thanks to my dear friend Officer Gharst. Oh boy! I mean if they were going to send someone, why couldn't they send that other guy. Was Officer Spring his name? Yeah, at least he knew how to smile.

Ring... ring... ring... I listened to the phone ring and ring. She wasn't picking up. Then finally her message machine clicked on, same as usual. "Hey there, this is Susan Parker and I'm so glad that you called. Sorry I wasn't able to pick up. Just leave your name and I'll try my best to call you back. God bless!"

Ugh... why didn't she answer? I didn't want to leave a message so I reverted back to my original plan to listen to HER message.

"Hey Jules, so this is what's up. We aren't going to be able to have lunch today because I am just now getting on a flight to Florida. My mother lives there and she just had a heart attack. The doctors don't know how long she's going to live so I feel that I need to be there. I know this is a big week for you girl and I am keeping you in my prayers. I love you sweet heart! Keep drawing near to Jesus. Just remember that through everything, I am SO SO SO proud of you. Okay we're boarding now... gotta go."

Beep.

I didn't know what to feel. I didn't know what to think. Here I had a police man waiting for me downstairs and a court date in front of me. She left? I understand why but that doesn't make it any easier. Then a song came into my mind. "Your grace is sufficient for me. Your strength is made perfect when I am weak. I'll trust in you. I'll trust in you alone my king." Over and over it played in my head.

I forced myself to start getting dressed because that's what I was upstairs to do in the first place. But as I pulled on my clothes I sang. And sang. And worshiped. It was all new to me, the praying and worshiping, but it seemed real. More real than about anything else in my life and I was learning to love it. I grabbed my purse and stuffed the bible the Mrs. Parker into it in case I needed encouragement later today.

Officer Gharst drove me to the police station and once we were there they took me into the same room as before. But this time they left the door open and a woman in hot pink was standing by the door taking notes.

"Hey Kid!" Officer Spring said as he walked in. "What did you do this time?"

"I'm still just as clueless as last time." I replied. It was relieving to see Mr. Spring, but I was still a little on edge to be sitting in this white room once again. It helped a little that Officer Gharst didn't come in the room with us this time.

"Here's the scoop Julia, remember that I told you that in the first burned building there was a man that was in the intensive care unit after the accident?"

"Yeah..." I replied.

Mr. Spring got a disgusted look on his face.

"Well, he died this morning and that puts us in a tough situation. You are accused of murder... twice."

I couldn't believe my ears. Why in the world?

"Why twice?" I asked.

"Because of your friend that died in the second building. We didn't do much about it three weeks ago because you reacted so different than a person would if they murdered on purpose, but now with the two incidents, we have to take drastic measures.

Drastic measures? The lady in hot pink was writing up a storm and I was beginning to get really nervous. What were they going to do to me?

"What's going to happen to me?" I asked. My head was swimming with possibilities. TWO MURDERS... and I'm only 16. And neither were my fault at all. "I didn't do it! PLEASE believe me!" I squealed.

"For now we are going to take you down to the Juvenile Detention center until your court date. After that, it depends on the outcome of the case."

"JUVY? Are you serious?"

"I'm afraid I am. It's a measure we have to take." He paused and then looked at his watch. "Officer Gharst will take you there in about thirty minutes, until then, Miss Anderson is going to ask you some questions and get you prepared for the environment you are about to enter."

"Okay." I murmured. But even as all of this was happening to me I didn't understand why, but I was filled with peace about it all. It was the weirdest thing. But I was so very thankful.

"Hey Honey, I'm Miss Anderson and I just want to tell you not to worry about anything. I'm sure that you are innocent and you just have to go to Juvy because of the law."

I liked her already! Her pink suit was a little distracting but seemed to fit her personality.

"You believe that I didn't do it?" I asked.

"Well, I can just tell that your attitude is right. You know? I don't know the details of this case, but I hope the best for you."

"Thank you so so much!" I exclaimed.

She went on to ask me questions like what I've been doing the last three weeks and where I have been. After we were done with questions she assured me that she would come see me in a few days after I got settled at the detention center to check up on me.

Officer Gharst then came to pick me up and although I was a little anxious to go, that song "You're grace is sufficient for me..." was just playing over and over in my head and I knew that everything would be okay. Oh how I missed Mrs. Parker though. I wish that she could be with me right now.

## **Chapter 11**

Bright and early Saturday morning one of the Juvenile Detention Center workers came and woke me up.

"Today's your trial. You best be getting up." She said.

"Alright." I replied. "Do you know when?" I asked.

"In about an hour around 10 o'clock" She answered and then walked out of the room.

I couldn't truthfully say that my week in Juvy was terrible, because it wasn't. But it sure wasn't enjoyable either. My emotions were up and down all week, but one thing that sure lifted my spirits was singing the few worship songs that I had learned in these last few weeks.

My dad came to see me the second day that I was there and told me that the divorce had been finalized. It was still, after a whole month of knowing, a shock to think of my parents always being apart... forever. He told me that I get to choose which parent to live with IF the whole court thing today goes over well. I would choose living with him instead of mom in a heartbeat.

My dad had brought me clothes from home to wear to court. And very relieved, I un-zipped my orange jump suit that I had been living in for the past week and put on the clothes my dad brought. He did a pretty good job actually, in choosing. A grey pencil skirt and a nice, but plain, black skirt. I felt very professional as I slipped on the clothes.

My mom hadn't come by to visit me at all. Now Tara on the other hand had been here everyday for her routine

bashes trying to discourage me. She was truly starting to get more and more on my nerves and everyday I've been trying to give it to God. It's really hard though, because sometimes it seems like he just doesn't hear or he just can't understand. I miss Mrs. Parker! I've needed her this week.

Through out this week I had started to realize that the only way I was going to win the court case was to tell the truth. And the truth was that MY sister was, in fact, guilty. And I did tell Gerald all of the truth yesterday when he came by to meet with me. sSo he knows and there's no going back. She's eighteen and probably will go to jail. My insides cringed at the thought of that. But at the same I wanted her to learn her lesson once and for all. And if she was in jail then she couldn't follow through with her threat of killing me.

When she told me that, I tried to push it to the back of my brain, but then re-examining her actions I was starting to believe it more and more. She wanted to KILL me! I didn't know why, but obviously she hated me. This hurted me to the core. I never did anything to her, at least not major. Why was everything continuing to be piling

on my back. I just couldn't understand it and this emotional exhaustion was starting to weigh me down.

I brushed through my hair, slipped on my clothes, and brushed my teeth and started to get really nervous. My hands started shaking and my throat felt like it was closing up a little bit and I wasn't even in the courtroom yet, not even on the way there to the court room yet.

"Jesus, I don't know how you can help me with these feelings, but I need you to. Amen." I prayed out loud to myself. Oh boy, what a day I had in front of me.

I gathered my few things that I had with me at the detention center and then went to wait up front in the office for Gerald and my dad to pick me up.

I sat there for about thirty minutes just thinking about life and my thoughts started drifting toward me losing. *What if Tara wins today? What if I'm the one to go to jail?* I couldn't spend too much time thinking about these things because I heard a familiar voice enter the room. But still that anxiety lingered in the back of my brain.

"Jules, you ready?" my dad asked as he walked past me to sign me out at the front desk.

Ready. Hmm... I slowly stood up and it took me a few seconds to gain my balance. "As ready as I'll ever be." I said with as much confidence as I could.

"Alright, well let's go get your name cleared." He said as he led me out of the office and out the front door. "We've got a whole lot to do today." I continued. I looked at his face and his eyes resembled those of a man who hadn't got sleep in days. He seemed tense and stressed and it was probably mostly my fault.

"Hey Julia, you ready?" Gerald asked as I climbed into the backseat of his Lexus.

"That's exactly what my dad asked me. Funny! You guys must think alike." I said trying to sound lighthearted.

"And your answer?" Gerald asked with a chuckle.

"She said 'I'm ready as I'll ever be'." My dad said with no emotion as he buckled his seatbelt in the front seat.

As we drove Gerald gave me some tips on court behavior, most of it was common sense, but it was good to be reminded.

"... And no cell phone! We don't want to risk it going off or anything." He added at the end.

"Oh don't worry, I left it at home when they took me to the police station last Saturday and haven't had it since."

The rest of the way my dad and Gerald talked and talked about legal stuff. I listened for a while, but soon got carried away in my thoughts. Once we pulled into the parking lot my dad turned back towards me.

"Honey, I just want you to know that I believe in you. And I believe you." Then he reached out his hand and grabbed mine. "I know that you didn't do it. No matter what happens today I still believe you. Okay?" Slowly he released my hand and turned around to unbuckle his seatbelt.

My dad had never said something like that to me before and I liked it so much it almost felt like I was in a movie or something. I mean he might just be buttering me up so that like him more than mom, but something deep down inside of me hoped that he was more mature than that. Hoping that he was truly genuine a smile spread across my face as a few tears escaped my eyes. I reached out and grabbed his arm and once he turned to look at me again I said.

"I love you daddy!"

"Julia May, I love you too."

Gerald had already got out of the car and so the sweet moment was cut short as we both realized that it was time to get this court thing over with.

My attorney was questioning Tara up on the stand.

"Where were you on October 27<sup>th</sup> at 3:30 pm?" he asked as he looked down at his notes.

Having already sworn on the bible I was hoping that Tara would tell the truth, but doubted that she would.

"With my friend at the Pizza Shoppe." She replied rather hastily after the question.

"What is your friend's name and which Pizza Shoppe were you at?" Gerald added.

"His name is Gunner Montgomery and we were at the one on 75<sup>th</sup> street."

"75<sup>th</sup> street... eh. Is Mr. Montgomery present?"

"Mmmhm."

"Alright, I will come back to him later." He paused to apply Chap Stick, which caused a little bit of an awkward silence, but I could only imagine that Gerald had done that to make Gunner (Oh, finally I know his name!) feel

uncomfortable. And he had succeeded to do so because I turned around to look at Gunner and he was squirming in his seat a little bit and trying to look anywhere but at my attorney. "Moving on... what do you have to say about the burning building. Evidence shows that you are the one who testified against your sister Julia." Gerald turned slightly around to look at me and then back at Tara.

Tara looked a little tense. I could tell that she was trying to look confident, but the bags under her eyes and the fighting of her fingers gave it away for me.

My own hands gripped the table that I was sitting at. *What? She's the one who turned me in? Why hadn't I thought of that before? Why hadn't Gerald tell me that before the court date?* I gulped down some water from the bottle in front of me. Inside, I was outraged. I felt like getting up and walking right up to Tara and giving her a piece of my mind. Mini movies started playing through my thoughts of different times that I could have confronted her about turning me in IF I would have KNOWN. Then it hit me.

Gerald didn't want to tell me. He didn't want me to know so that I didn't do anything rash or stupid. He wanted to bring out into the open Tara turning me in to the fuzz on the SPOT so that Tara especially didn't have time to

think of a good response, but Tara was the MASTER at good responses so I wasn't sure if even this would daunt her.

My attention immediately turned from myself onto Tara and her motions. She wasn't as hasty to answer this question as the previous ones, but I could tell by the look in her eyes that she wasn't intimidated to answer it. She was strong... too strong for her own good. The walls that she has built up over the years help her in moments like this and I was starting to wonder why in the world I was trying to go against her force. But deep down I still knew why.

"Well, Mr. Simon..." She paused to take a quick breath and I am guessing to add dramatic emphasis. It sure worked. I felt the whole room lean two inches in awaiting what she would say. "It was very very hard for me to make the decision to tell. I hate seeing my sister hurt, but I felt that justice must be served someday and it might as well be with this crime before the next one comes on worse. It's for the good of Julia and for our community. Don't you agree?" she asked with a sympathetic face that almost made ME want to believe her lies.

I wanted to be deaf at that moment. I would rather not hear what she was saying about me, the lies that she was telling. I felt my ear drums were ringing too loud for

comfort and I wanted to scream, but I couldn't because that wouldn't be helpful at all.

Gerald asked her a few more questions and she played her little goody two shoes character perfectly and didn't slip at any point in the conversation. My heart dropped because my chances seemed to be getting slimmer by the minute. I couldn't tell where he was going with it because it seemed as though he didn't care that she was lying even though that he KNEW she was.

Once he was done he came back to sit down beside me and I leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"What was that about? You played right into her little act."

"Don't worry. I have a plan. Gunner's dad is here" He whispered back. And because of the smirk on his face Gunner's dad must mean a lot. I was just hoping that he truly did have a plan. A good plan! I had liked Gerald Simon from the start, hopefully he won't let me down now.

"Ju-li-a, would you please step for-ward." The judge said as he looked at me. He was a little man, not too intimidating, but I could tell that he took his job seriously by the manner in which he spoke enunciating his every word.

"Place your hand on the bi-ble." He continued.

I obeyed and he asked, "Do you sol-emn-ly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and no-thing but the truth, so help you God?"

"Yes sir." I replied.

"Then please step up here for quest-ion-ing." He motioned to the witness box and I immediately followed his instruction. The way he spoke was a little humorous to me, but I had very little time to think about something of such little importance.

Before the judge said one more word or anything else happened I remembered what book I just swore on. The bible. Being a follower of Jesus was very new and different to me, but I knew that if I told the truth. Completely. Totally. With no exception. That everything should turn out alright.

"O-kay, I want to be-gin with the SE-COND build-ing." The small man said as looked up from his notes. "Why were you in the build-ing num-ber 2?"

"I was there because I wanted to see if there were any teenagers hanging out there that could have burned down burned down building number 1."

Now that I thought back on it, it wasn't one of my best ideas, but what was I supposed to do, sit and do nothing to prove my innocence.

"So, you went there for no o-ther rea-son but to look for teen-age-rs?" he asked.

"Correct. And I did NOT bring any flammable objects of matches or anything but while I was in the building Tara and her boyfriend, Gunner, set the building a flame."

I felt the whole room turn and look at me because of shock and surprise probably. I quickly glanced at Tara's face and I could tell that she was about to explode. Then I looked at my dad, his face firm and steady but his eyes going back and forth from my to my sister to me to my sister.

Did you see them do this?"

He must have known that I hadn't seen them, because otherwise he wouldn't have asked.

I paused and then tried my best to answer, "No, I didn't actually SEE them do it, but they were the last people that I saw before I realized that the building was on fire."

"Real-ly?" inquired the judge.

"Judge may I please question Gunner Montgomery?" asked Gerald.

"Sure. Let's get two per-spect-ives."

The judge took Gunner through the whole process of swearing into honesty and after he was finally on the testifying stand Gerald took a big gulp of his Diet Coke and the proceeded on with his "plan" I guess.

"Gunner, do you know the consequences for you lying in court?"

"Um... no... not really."

"Let's just say you could easily go to jail."

The look on Gunners face searched the room and I could tell that he was locking eyes with a man in the back that very much resembled him. I was guessing it was his dad. Gunner seemed like very strong a few weeks ago when I ran in to him a few times with Tara, but right now he seemed like a little boy again. Gerald must have somehow known about this weakness, I was impressed.

"Alright, well, knowing that lying is a crime; Let me continue with my questioning.. Were you apart in any way of EITHER buildings being burned."

Gunners eyes shifted back and forth across the room. He seemed sheepish but finally he spoke.

"Yes, sir." He quietly let out as he tried to lift up his chin to keep his head up.

Gasps filled the entire room. I couldn't believe that this was happening.

"Can you please tell me about it?" asked Gerald.

"Sure, well... I was bored and I don know... it just seemed exciting. I really didn't mean for anyone to get hurt, everything happened so fast. Yeah..."

I was still up on the testifying stand the other side of the judge's seat so Gerald asked me a question.

"Did you burn down either building?"

"No sir. I promise I didn't." I said.

After I said those words Gerald went on to tell about his evidence on how Tara and Gunner were guilty.

"There had been a security tape from the 7-11 gas station down the street from the second building that shows Gunner and Tara buying a two gallons of gasoline as well as a some finger prints on the remains of building number one..."

The whole room was in shock of the outcome of the court case and I felt like hugging every single person in the entire room.



but Lydia was already gone, so I guess I didn't have too much to worry about.

All of the sensations that I had felt when Lydia had died rushed back for a split second and although I was sad and missed her, but what had happened today had proved I could do it! With Jesus on my side anything was possible.

At that moment everything was sort of a blur. People were leaving the court room. Tara and Gunner were getting led out a different door. My parents were yelling at each other (surprise... surprise). But all I could think about was Susan Parker. I hadn't talked to her in over a week and she was in Florida with her mother. I wanted to know how she was doing. I reached into the pocket of my skirt for my cell phone, but then remembered that I hadn't had that thing in over a week. Instead decided to ask a woman that was standing about 10 feet away from me if she could spare a quarter. I wiped my eyes and got my emotions under control and stood to my feet.

"Ma'am, is there any chance that you could spare a quarter? I need to make a very important phone call."

She gave me a funny look, but then reached into her pocket and pulled a quarter out and placed it in my hand. I

didn't care what she thought of me asking for money... I just wanted to talk to Susan.

I slipped out of a side door in the court room while all the commotion of people leaving was happening, making my escape not very noticeable. And then I scurried around to find the nearest pay phone. Finally, after about 2 minutes of frantic searching I found one. I dialed 865-4920.. I remembered her phone number like I remember my address.

Ring... Ring... Ring... I prayed that she would answer, otherwise I would have to go ask for another quarter and by now my parents and attorney were probably wondering where I was.

"Hello." A voice on the other end said.

"Hey... is this Susan? This is Jules." I exclaimed probably a little too loud into the phone.

"Oh, my precious girl. How is everything?" she said in a very even and controlled tone.

"Well, do you have time?"

"Yes, I don't have to be to the f... um... I have about 15 minutes."

That was a little weird; I wondered why she wouldn't tell me where she had to be. I quickly looked past that and got back into the conversation.

"Alright, well first of all..." the tears started to well up once again in my eyes. "I was declared innocent! I don't have to go to jail!"

"Oh, praise Jesus... I knew that everything would work out. I just knew it."

"Yeah, but this last week I spent in the juvenile detention center and it was so lonely. I just wanted you to be here. Anyway, we proved Tara and her boyfriend Gunner guilty and I'm not sure what is going to happen to them."

"I'm sure they'll be fine, and hopefully learn their lesson." She said in a mom voice. I just loved that mom voice of hers.

"When will you be home?" I asked.

"Well, it depends..."

"On what?"

"Jules," there was a long pause and I could hear her sniff a few times and all of a sudden when she tried to talk again her voice got really high so she paused to quiet herself.

"Are you alright?" I asked in a very low tone. I had only seen Susan cry at her daughter's funeral. And it had to be something really bad to get this woman sad. Fear crept all the way up my body as I waited for her response.

"My mother died on Wednesday." She let out in a very contained way, but only seconds after that calm statement she said, "Her funeral is today and I have to leave soon."

My head was spinning. Why did this one woman have to lose her daughter and her mother right after each other? It just doesn't seem fair. Then I realized that I should be saying something to comfort her.

"Um..." my head wanted to speak, but my clenched mouth wouldn't co-operate. "Can I pray for you?" was the only thing that I could think to ask, but right after those words escaped my lips I realized that I had never prayed for someone OUT LOUD before.

I heard her breath in and out and then say "I would love it if you would."

First, I thought a silent prayer to God:

"Dear God, please give me the strength to do this and the words to say. Amen"

Then I opened up my mouth and just let it come out. Everything I knew about the bible.

"Dear God, I want to pray for Susan. Thank you for everything she's done in my life. Um... She sure does show your love. Well... I don't understand why these two deaths have happened to two people so very close to her in such a

little time frame, but we trust in you because you can carry us through. It's hard. And uh... It sucks. But you are faithful even when we are, you know, faithless. Umm... your grace is sufficient. I don't completely know what that means, but I know that it means that when we can't do it ourselves you are there. Please be there for Mrs. Parker. So... In Jesus' name, amen."

Fee-ew. I thought to myself once I was done. I was a little self-conscience on how it had sounded, but then I remembered that it was just Susan and she wouldn't think any less of me. I could hear her on the other side of the phone crying harder now.

"Julia..." She paused and then exclaimed with joy even through her tears, "I am SO proud of you. You are growing and I am truly blessed to be a part of that journey. God is getting big in you and I cannot wait for you to share with the world what he has done" By now she had gotten herself contained again. Talking must help her do that, to me it makes it worse.

"Susan, you have no idea how much you mean to me! I don't even have any idea what you are going through or whatever but I know that it's hard."

"Honey, yes it's hard, but your prayer sums it up, God is still faithful. He is. And I will CHOOSE to praise Him everyday and glorify His name."

"You see... I just don't understand how you can do that after losing as much as you have."

"It's been a process of... transformation. I sure wouldn't be this strong one month after I accepted... Christ. I think it took me about 4 months until I was... comfortable praying... out loud. Anyway, I cannot wait to come... home and talk... to you deary, but... I have to go now... Okay?" As she spoke there were lots of pauses for her to keep herself contained. My heart really went out to her and I felt a tear go down my own face.

"Okay. I'll see you when I see you then."

"Alright, I love you..." she paused to sniff, "sweet sweet girl. Keep falling in love with Jesus."

"Will do!"

"Bye" she said.

Just as I uttered "Bye" back I felt a hand on my shoulder and as my heard started to pound I jumped. A little squeal escaped my lips and once I realized who it was I felt very childish and immature.

"We've been looking for you Jules." My dad said in a half way stern voice. All of my thoughts rushed back to the emotions I felt right before I made the phone call and I kind of ignored my dad's comment.

"Dad, we won!" I exclaimed.

"I know that, but that does mean that your sister has to go to jail. It was kind of a lose situation either way." He said. I didn't agree with him, but decided to leave that part out at that second.

"Anyway, Gerald has some good news for us, but he won't tell me until I get you into the room."

"Well, then what are we waiting for? Let's go." I replied. All of the emotions that I felt for Susan hadn't left but I had to just let them go to the back of my mind. I knew that she was strong and would be able to handle it with Jesus' strength with her. I had my own stuff to worry about too.

"Hey, get over here you two." said Gerald as we entered as we walked over to him standing by the judge in the lobby.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well, the only thing against you having Josh live at your house was your accused crimes AND your mothers break down in the hospital room... correct?"

"Yes, that's right." I replied. And I could feel my dad listening close and nodding his head. Losing Joshy was disheartening for him too, I was convinced.

"And your parents are officially divorced and your dad and living in different houses... correct?"

"mmhm." I replied.

"Well then first things first... Do you want to live with your mother or father?"

"Defiantly father." I said without any pause.

At that I felt my dad's hand on my shoulder and it made me even more confident that everything would work out.

"Then I believe that you and your father can once again have custody of Josh and he can live with you."

My eyes started filling up with tears and I looked at my dad's face and I could tell that although he didn't want to show it through crying he was so relieved and happy.

"When do we get to see him?" my dad asked Gerald.

"Well, there is a lot of paper work and phone calls that I will have to make but you might be able to have your little guy back by the end of this week."

"REALLY?!" I exclaimed. Words couldn't describe how happy I was.

My dad squeezed the shoulder that his hand was on and turned me around. I looked up into his eyes. His huge empty eyes, but I saw a little glimmer of hope in them.

"I'm so proud of you Jules." He said. And then he hugged me. I hadn't hugged him in months and it felt so good to know that he was PROUD of me.☺

Finally, I felt like all of my hard work and had paid off. Not the way I would have dreamed it to, but still I knew that everything would be alright. The main thing was Joshy. Joshy was going to be with me again. I was going to get to teach him things and see him grow up again. And I knew that my dad was PROUD of me. That's what I needed all along.

I missed Lydia and knew that she wasn't coming back but I continue to remember who she was and wait she stood for when she lived. I keep working on being a better listener and truly caring about others and their feelings.

I kind of felt bad for Tara. I mean if I were her I wouldn't even want to live, but hopefully she's learning and will turn out a better person. Maybe just maybe I can show her something. Something that I have that she needs.

Something real. Someone personal. And honest. Not just Tara  
either, maybe now I can show the whole world what Jesus has  
done in me!

The End.