# Ashley

## STRUGGLES FOR HER LIFE

by *Ola Montán*



# Preface

This book is a totally independant follow-up to my previous book, “Lisa,” which in turn is a continuation of my first book, “Angelica”. You don’t need to read any of these earlier books to understand the plot of this book.

The book is about Ashley, a girl who becomes disabled as a child. I have no knowledge or experience of how it’s to live as a disabled person, but the whole story is solely a result of my imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or persons is purely coincidental. This also applies to all claims of mental states and how these can be cured.

Finally, although all places and institutions are authentic places, all the details of these are pure fantasy and have no connection to reality.

I hope that the book can be entertaining and imaginative.

The Author

CHAPTER 1

# The assault



Amy poked at Ashley that was sitting down beside her, searching in a book.

– Come on, Ash! We are going to miss everyone if we will be sitting here at the library too long!

– Take it easy, Amy! I'll just find some more facts about Canada first. You know that I don't have the same studying head as you have.

– But we'll miss all the hot guys when they comes out from Princeton University, you know!

– You and your guys! You're only sixteen years old, just like me. Are not you too young to be dating collage guys?

– I don't date them, just checking them out. Come on now!

– Well, alright then. I'll come if it's so important for you.

The best friends walked side by side down the street on the way to campus. They was going in the same class in high school and had been best friends since elementary school. If you didn't know better, you could take them for sisters with the same body shape, shoulder length brown hair which they always had let out.

– Why do you spend so much time at the library nowadays? Last year we were always downtown fooling around. But now It's just a few weeks on our third year, and you always sit with your nose inside the books.

– It's because my grades in freshman year stank and they became even worse last year. They were so bad that my parents went crazy over me. You know that I'm not crappy with school work actually, but I messed around instead of reading. I've promised Dad to pull myself together this year.

– Ah, so you will become a drag? I was looking forward to having fun with you throughout this year too.

– You know that I'm not a bore, but I always liked to study. Don't tell me you don't do that also, because you have like better grades then everyone in the class. I just can't understand how you can do it without working all the time!

– Well, excuse me if I find it easy to learn. Alright, alright, if you'll have to study then you'll have to. But can't we hang out on weekends anyway?

– Of course we can. I can't study all the time.

– Check that out!

– What?

– There! Those three guys that are walking toward us. The blonde stud on the right is ho-ot, don't you think?

– You're hopeless! Hey, wait a second. Look at the guy on the left with the sand colored hair! Isn't it kind of a gigantic knife he holds in his hand poking his nails with?

– Well it is, actually. I guess he wants to look tough. But it's the blonde that I want to check out.

– Come on, lets speed up a bit, I got bad vibes from this!

– Asch, they're harmless.

But Ashley got a bit scared and increased her speed to pass the three students faster. But Amy continued to stare at "her" guy and ended up several meters behind Ashley. All three guys seemed unsteady on their legs and was definitely influenced by something,

Just when the guy with sandy colored hair was to pass Ashley, he suddenly flipped the knife in his hand. A second later, Ashley felt a burning pain in her back and her legs just gave way under her. Amy watched in horror as she fell forwards with the big knife in her back. She froze to the ground and saw the guy bend down to pull the knife out of Ashley's back with a nonchalant motion. Then the blood began to spray and within seconds her backside turned red.

Ashley started screaming in pain on the ground and Amy came to life. The guy with the knife looked shocked and started to run away together with the one in the middle. Amy ran up to her friend and pulled up the blouse at the back. She became ice cold when she saw blood spraying out like a fountain from the wound and realized that Ashley would die if she didn't do anything. She took a large handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it against the wound. Ashley screamed even higher but Amy managed to limit the blood spurting.

She looked around in panic and saw that several had already stopped. Further down the street two big men had wrestled the man with the knife down onto the ground while his friend fled the scene. Amy's "favorite" didn't run away but stood with pale face looking shocked at Ashley and Amy, who shouted:

– Call 911 anybody! We need an ambulance here, my friend is dying!

One of the spectators already had his phone at his ear and shouted to alert the operator to hurry up. It only took a few minutes for the ambulance to arrive, but Amy thought it felt like an hour. The paramedic told Amy to let go and realized immediately how bad it was. He quickly put a tourniquet and then lifted Ashley up on a stretcher and into the ambulance. Amy entered too, and soon they were on their way at full speed to the emergency room at the University Medical Centre of Princeton long before the police had arrived to the scene.

Amy sat at Ashley's head and tried to talk to her. Ashley's voice became weaker and weaker and Amy increasingly fearful. When they finally arrived an unconscious Ashley was rolled into the emergency room at full speed and a medical team received her and hurried her to an operating room. Amy was shaking all over but still took out her cell phone to call her mother.

Erin was already home from work when the phone rang. First, she couldn't understood a word of what the person on the other end said. Amy couldn't almost talk out of shock.

– Mom, it's A– Amy. Some– something terr-ib-le has happ- happened!

– Calm down, dear. What happened and where are you?

– I'm at the hospital. I– In the ER. You have to come here. I'm, I'm ...

– Of course I' coming! But what on earth has happened? My God, have you been in an accident?

– It's not me. It's, oh my God, you see, Ashley has got a knife in her back and is in the hospital now. You have to call her parents, I don't think she will ma– make it.

– Are you kidding me? It that case, it's a very distasteful joke.

– No, Amy sobbed. It's true. It ... it's horrible true. I'm alone here and Ashley have been rolled into an operating room. She bleeds profusely! I'm almost sure that she will die!

Edit realized that this was genuine, Amy had never sounded so desperate and had never joked about something this serious before. So she phoned home to Ashley's house and told Ashley's mother that she must come to the hospital too. Then she rushed out of the house in shock and drove down to the hospital. On the way in to the waiting room so she almost collided with Judith, Ashley's mother, who was heading to the same place. They knew each other pretty well, as their daughters have been friends for so long. When they came into the waiting room and saw Amy sitting there, Erin screamed in horror. Amy's school uniform was soaked with blood from the neck to the knees, and she had even spots in her face not to mention her hands.

– Amy, darling! Are you hurt? You're bleeding something awful! Is there no physician that can help you!?!

– Calm down, Mom, it's not my blood.

She looked at Judith.

– I'm sorry to say this, mrs. Cox, but all this is Ashley's blood.

Judith swayed and looked as if she would faint standing. A nurse came up to her and helped her to a chair. She gave some napkins to Amy so she could wipe her hands and face a bit.

– Are you the mother of the young girl who just came in?

Amy replied in Judith's place.

– Yes, this is Judith Cox, the mother of Ashley, the girl that just came in with a knife wound in her back.

The nurse sat down next to Judith and took her hands.

– Mrs Cox, I will tell you what I know about your daughter's condition. Right now we don't know very much other that she is alive and have ongoing surgery. She has lost a lot of blood and has received a blood transfusion. Unfortunately, I don't know more, It's too early to say anything. But we have our very best surgeon in there giving her the best possible help right now.

– Wi– will she sur– survive, Judith stuttered.

– Unfortunately, It's too early to say anything certain yet. The medical team gives priority to save her life right now, rather than to provide status updates. It would help if we knew her blood type so we can give her the right kind of blood.

– It's B +.

The nurse promised to return as soon as she knew more, but warned that it could take some time. Judith collapsed in her chair and buried her face in her hands. The door banged up and Joel came rushing into the room. He saw Amy sitting and hugging her mother, that by now also had blood on her clothes. He was also close to faint from the sight and stumbled over to Judith.

– Sweetheart, Erin called me at work and said that our daughter was here. What has happened?

Judith tried to explain what she knew and Joel started to cry in despair. He hugged his wife, who did her best to be strong and to comfort him. The last thing she needed right now was a man who broke down too, now that she was on the verge herself. Oh, what she right now wished she had married a strong, confident man instead, as she now needed a reliable shoulder to lean on.

After a while, a policewomen came into the waiting room looking around. When she noticed Amy's clothes, she went up to her and asked:

– Excuse me, miss. Is it you who witnessed a stabbing incident outside the campuses for less than an hour ago?

– Yes, unfortunately I am.

– Is this your mother? Because I'd really like to get a chance to interrogate you about the incident, and since you are a minor, you need a parent to attend.

– This is my mother, of course. Do you think I would hug a stranger?

– Of course not, but I have to ask anyway. I'm sorry to have to ask for this, but it's vital that we hear your testimony while you have it fresh in your mind. Do you think you can handle it?

Amy nodded and she and her mother followed the policewoman into an empty room. She told her everything she had seen while police took notes and asked

questions. Her mother became more and more shocked by the horror of the attack and that her daughter has been so close. Finally, the police were satisfied and said to her:

– Thanks for all the information. I would think that the prosecutor will want to call you as a witness at the trial. Could I ask you to come in to the police station either later today or tomorrow to read the statement and possibly answer a few more questions, if we have some?

Amy promised that and police went to Judith and Joel to ask them if they allowed that the police could get information about Ashley's condition, which they accepted. Amy sat down again to wait. Her mother said that they must go home, because Amy's little brother was hungry at home so she had a little bad conscience.

– Mom, please let me stay here at the hospital! I just need to hear how things are with Ash, otherwise I can't sleep tonight. I'll go home by myself later. I don't know when because we don't know how many hours it will take before I can meet her. It can be really late, but I will not be able no sleep anyhow until I know, so it doesn't matter. Please, Mom?

– Well, yes, okay then, although I don't like it. But you call me when you want to come home, alright? It doesn't matter if it's the middle of the night. It's a terrible experience you've had today, and it may be a delayed reaction later. And how it would look if you where riding the bus in your bloody clothes?

– You're right, Mom. Sure, I'm a bit in shock, but I'll be fine. I promise to call when I want to go home.

Erin said some encouraging words to Judith and Joel before she walked away. Amy continued to wait anxiously along with Ashley's parents. After several hours, finally a doctor came out to them. He sat down and looked at all three of them with a serious facial expression.

– Your daughter, Ashley is now in the recovery room, and in a while she will be transported to a department where she will stay. I assume that you have already solved the matter with health insurance at the counter?

– We have not been able to afford health insurance, but don't worry, we will pay what it takes to get her well, said Joel. We have resources and we can borrow money on the house at worst.

– Right now we only think of Ashley, Judith said with a weak voice. Will she make it?

– I will be brutally honest with you. When she came in she was dying and the condition was extremely serious. She have a very deep wound in the back that was bleeding a lot so she has lost a lot of blood. I've heard that someone sat by her side pressing something on the wound until the ambulance arrived, and that has undoubtedly saved her life.

– It was probably me, Amy said with a weak voice.

The doctor looked at Amy in surprise.

– We have managed to stop the blood flow, and right now the situation is serious but stable. She is not awake, because we want to keep her in a sort of artificial coma for a few days to allow her body to recover first. It's too risky if we allow her to wake up right now and she starts to move. Unfortunately, we will not know whether she has received any brain damage until we wake her up.

– Brain damage, oh my God! Do you mean that she ...

His voice broke down. The idea was too terrible to cope with.

– Right now there are no indications that the brain has been damaged, but I just want you to be prepared if it should be so. Her heart, however, has stopped at least three times, and that's never good.

– That's terrible to hear! But beside from that, will she recover otherwise, Amy asked anxiously as neither Judith nor Joel couldn't get any words out.

– Well, yes, in a way. The knife went in just between the last and second last vertebra in her spine. The fortunate thing is that no vital organs in the abdominal cavity was damaged, but It's likely that the nerves in the spine has been severely damaged. There is a quite safe assumption that she will be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. But worse things could have happened. She is young

and seems agile and can certainly become very skilled transporting herself in a wheelchair with time.

Judith hugged Joel hard but got little comfort. Joel shook with sobs and could not say anything. Amy tried to console them both, and promised to help Ashley as much as possible when she could leave the hospital. Judith hugged Amy and thanked her. Then Amy called her mother that she wanted to be picked up as it had become quite late.

She was shaking in the car on the way home. She had not told anyone that Ashley's heart had already stopped in the ambulance on the way and paramedics had to get it started again. Would she really survive? She cried herself to sleep that night.

The next day Amy couldn't go too school so Erin called her in sick. Then they went to the police station where Amy read through a report that the policewomen had entered into the computer. Amy commented on a few things but was eventually satisfied so the police printed it out on paper that she had to sign. Then he presented a card for her on the computer with ten faces.

– Can you point out which of these individuals you saw? Take your time and don't point until you are completely sure. I have plenty of time to wait!

– That's the guy with the knife, she said after a brief moment. I'm quite sure.

The police thanked him and presented ten new faces. Now she hesitated quite a while before she pointed at one of them.

– I'm 95% sure that he is the guy in the middle.

Then she got the final card, with ten new faces. Without hesitation, she pointed to a face.

– He went to the right. I'm positive. Did I get them all right?

– You have identified the suspects, so it's probably true. The first was held at the scene with bloody clothes and the last one never deviated from the place so he was interrogated yesterday and has been released. For the remaining individual we have the name, but have not found him yet.

– What about the hansom blonde? What is he accused of? I'm pretty sure he didn't have anything to do with the attack.

– We can't really discuss an ongoing case, but the two are currently not accused of anything, perhaps it may be leaving a crime scene. But the investigation is not finished yet. We at PPD thank you for coming here and you will likely hear from the prosecutor eventually.

Amy and her mother left the police station together.

– Mom, can you drop me off at the hospital? I just need to hear how things are with Ash. You've already contacted the school and said that I will not be there today. Please, Mom?

– Well, yes, okay then. Just hope you can cope with it. You have to promise to call if it gets too hard or if you want to be picked up!

– Oh yeah, I promise, Mom. But I think I'll can get home by myself. It's impossible to know how long I will stay there. I just need to see with my own eyes that she is alive. . Just take it easy, I can handle this.

Amy went into the hospital on trembling legs and found out where Ashley was laying. Judith had been there all night, so she sat there and they exchanged a few words. Ashley was sedated and had a lot of wires on her body that was attached to machines beside her. She looked so pale, as if she was already dead. But a machine was blipping constantly and Amy realized that it was Ashley's heartbeat. She put her arm gently around Ashley and cried a little bit. But soon she understood that she could not do anything for her. But still she sat there for a few hours and talked with her, although she probably didn't hear a word.

She continued to visit her friend every evening after school, talking to her deaf ears.

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At last the day came when they would try to bring Ashley out of her coma. Amy was there and of course both Judith and Joel along with various other people. The nurse closed almost reverently of the tube that kept her sedated. After

half an hour the doctor came in because she started to show some signs of life. She woke up and noticed that she was lying on her stomach, and it felt uncomfortable. She turned with an great effort onto her side and screamed in pain.

– Ouch! Why does it hurt so much? And where am I, actually?

Judith exhale. It seemed that Ashley's brain was working as it should anyhow.

– Where does it hurt? the doctor asked.

– It's a terrible pain in my lower back, and then it beams down in both legs down to the toes. It's as if my legs are on fire!

– We will give you something for the pain. You have been hurt with a knife in your back, but we think you are out of danger now.

He gave her a shot and the pain slowly went away. She tried to reposition her legs that had become crossed, but nothing happened. Judith hugged her long and also Joel hugged her gently. Amy noticed her problem and moved her legs so they lay parallel before she hugged her friend.

– Everything will be fine now, Ash. It will surely not be long until your wound has healed. Before you know it, you are released from here and we are both back in school as before. The doctors have patched you up so you're like new again.

– But why can't I move my legs then?

Judith's face became expressionless while Joel sobbed a little. Amy took her hand and squeezed it, and tried to comfort.

– Ash, it will be all right. The knife may have made you a little paralyzed in your legs, you see. But we are all here and can help you. You get a wheelchair, train a bit in it and before you know it, we are out on the streets again and checking the guys just like before. You just see!

– PARALYZED! Don't try to joke like that with me, Amy! It's not fun at all!

– Unfortunately, it's true, the doctor said. The nerves in your spine has been cut off and can't be repaired. But you are young and strong. I have dealt with hundreds of young people who ended up in a wheelchair, and they get along just

great. You will just need a little training and rehabilitation and then everything will work out for you.

– But my legs can't be paralyzed, she said with a desperate tone. I have so much pain in them, that means well that they still work? Just not right now?

– It's called phantom pain. It's the wounded nerve endings that send pain signals to the brain that it interprets erroneously. They will pass eventually. Everything will be fine before you know it!

Ashley looked from one to the other. If there were no problems, why was her father crying? And why did both her mother and Amy look so sad? She began to feel sleepy from the drug she had received. She cried herself quietly to sleep. The doctor them turned to her parents and Amy.

– This will work out, eventually. She'll probably sleep for a while now. I'm very optimistic about her chances to pull this off. But she will need lots of support from all of you, so try to be strong for her.

– Then it's probably best that I don't come here so often, Joel said quietly. I can't bear to be strong right now.

– You are a great help, Judith snarled. You are a man, it would make sense that you are strong for your family!

– I'm sorry, but it's just the way I'm. There nothing I can do about it.

After a while, he left together with Amy. Judith stayed there so she could be there if Ashley would wake up again to comfort her. She felt a little better that it seemed as if her daughter would get out of this crisis.

Little could she foresee that the crisis was far from over. No, it had barely started yet and would only get worse. Amy went past the hospital after school every day. She always tried to wipe her tears carefully before she went into the room where Ashley was. Then she put on a big smile and greeted the same way every day.

– Hey Ash, shall will go and check out guys today?

Ashley didn't answer, she just lay there, staring holes in the wall. Amy chattered on about everything that happened in school and general gossip from the world. But she got no response at all, it seemed that Ashley given up already. Still, Amy said every day that she would come back the following day.

Ashley had nothing to do other than to brood. How could Amy think they would ever check out guys again? As if she had not seen the tears in Amy's eyes every time she came to visit! What guy would be interested in a cripple who is stuck in a wheelchair? No one at all! And school? What was the meaning of it when she would be a hopeless package for the rest of her life? No, Ashley found nothing that could give her life any meaning anymore. The best would be to just end it all herself, for everyone just became sad to see her. Her father could not even get the strength to visit her! If she no longer existed, they would all be able to go on with their lives.

One night she was lying as usual, pondering what she should do. Then she saw a pair of scissors as a nurse left behind on the table. She grabbed the scissors and felt the edge. It seemed really sharp. She turned and twisted it while the thoughts swirled in her head. She knew what she must do and gathered the courage to do it. Then she put the scissors on her wrist and cut it. It was really painful and she had to bite her lip to keep from screaming. At the same time, the pain almost felt good. But what the heck! It had hardly been a mark from the scissors. She cut her again, really hard this time. Now some blood came out. Finally!

She lay on her back and waited for the death. Nothing happened and she looked at her wrist. My God, if she would bleed this slowly, she would be old before she bled to death! She braced herself, put the scissors on the wrist for a third time, eyes shut and holding her breath. Then she cut it with all her strength. It was terrible painful, and she could not help but scream. But now the blood was pumping out of the artery. She felt a euphoria for the first time since she woke up in the hospital. It was as if all her misfortune ran out through the wrist.

Then she heard a door banging and someone screamed. Suddenly it swarmed people around her that was trying to stop the blood flow. She screamed and tried

to get loose, and was fighting furiously. Could thy not understand that she didn't want any help? Finally, she got an injection that caused her to fall asleep.

The phone rang at the home of Judith and Joel. Both woke up and Judith went sleepily up to answer. What time was is actually? She glanced at the wall clock in the hall. Half past two in the morning! She got a bad feeling that Ashley had become worse. She picked up the phone and answered.

Joel heard her scream as if she was the one that got had got a knife in herself. He jumped up out of bed and found his wife screaming and pounding her fists into the wall. She had dropped the phone on the floor.

– What happened, he screamed. Have there been any complication with Ashley?

Judith stared at him. He was frightened by her facial expressions.

– She has attempted suicide, that's what happened. They have stitched her up and moved her to the psychiatric emergency department. We have to get in there now! You drive, I can't do it right now!!

Joel shook as he backed the car out of the garage. My God, he was not sure he could drive himself! But somehow they managed to get to the hospital and also found the emergency department for psychiatric problems. Then they managed to nag themselves in there, even though it was actually a closed section. Judith had no identification with her to prove that she was Ashley's mother, because she still had a robe on over her nightdress. Fortunately, Joel had brought his driving license so soon as they sat next to Ashley's bed.

Joel felt really bad when he saw the bandage around Ashley's left wrist. Judith sat down and wept silently at her bedside. What on earth would they do to get her to believe in her future again? How could she feel so terribly bad that she did something desperate like this? She slept heavily from the drug that she had received, so after one hour Joel said that he had to get up early the following day to go to his work, so he went home while Judith declared that she would stay until Ashley woke up, even if it would take all night.

Ashley slept heavily from the soporific the whole night an morning while Judith dozed in the visitor's chair. Late in the morning then Judith finally heard how Ashley sighed deeply, almost like a groan. She opened her eyes and looked around.

- Good morning darling, Judith said, strained cheerfully.

Ashley looked at her with a blank face without saying anything. Judith continued to talk, but got no answer. She made an effort to sound happy and supportive while she tried to get Ashley to say something, but she didn't even show that she knew that her mother was sitting there.

In the afternoon, Amy came to the hospital on their daily visit. To her surprise, the room where Ashley had been was empty and the bed was made. She asked where Ashley was but got only cryptic answers about "patient confidentiality". Instead, she tried to call Ashley on her cell phone. Judith had refused to give up so she was still sitting beside her daughter's bed when her phone rang. Ashley looked at her phone, made a face and denied the call.

- Who was it on the phone, darling?

To Judith's relief, she finally got an answer, even if it was not the answer she had wished for.

- It was Amy. I don't want to talk to her anymore. It's her fault that I'm lying here, she would just let me bleed to death on the sidewalk!

- But, my God, she saved your life. And then she has visited you here every day to try to cheer you up. She loves you, as a friend. Surely you understand that?

- But I hate her! She comes here chatting too much acting all happy when I am so sad. It is so irritating! I never want to see her again! Can't you tell her that?

Judith fell silent. She could not think of anything more to say to cheer up Ashley. Finally she decided to go home anyway, so she called Joel and asked to be picked up. He had finished working so he passed the hospital on the way home and picked Judith up, who still had her robe on.

Amy continued to try to call her best friend, but she didn't connect. In the evening she called Judith to ask what happened to Ashley. Judith didn't have the heart to express what Ashley wanted her to say. Instead she just said:

- Ashley is not feeling so good right now and need some time to find herself again. She will certainly contact you when she feels ready.

Amy had no idea what happened but had to settle for it.

Now Ashley began to brood on a plan to succeed in the next suicide. First, she must gain her parents' trust so they would take her away from this hospital where she was constantly monitored. Then she needed access to sharp knives, and there had it of course at home. She turned the problem back and forth, but realized it would not be easy to kill herself, so she had to be really tricky.



CHAPTER 2

# No strength to live



Ashley had laid awake all evening and night, brooding over why it was her that got a knife in her back. In which way did she deserve this? Although she had been lazy before, but right now she worked very hard in order to pull herself together! But now everything was ruined, because she had no future anymore. It was not even worth trying, because she would always be a helpless package, needing help from others all the time. Instead, she just laid in bed the whole midmorning and was

feeling worse and worse. In the afternoon a man with a mild appearance and large, round glasses came into her room and closed the door behind him.

– Hi there. My name is Doctor Freeman and I'm a psychologist here in the department. I will help you feel better. Can you describe for me what makes you sad, so we start from there?

– It ought to be obvious. Are you stupid or something? I'm a damn cripple. Is that not enough?

– Well, hmm, so that is the way that you feel. I'm sincerely sorry that you feel that way. But you should know that I and many of us really cares about you and wants to help you. With therapy and exercise, you will for sure again get an enriched life, you will see. Let's talk about what makes you sad.

– I don't feel like talking right now. Can't I call you if I feel down instead? I feel so alone sometimes!

– Of course, you can always contact me. I'm here for you. That's why I'm here talking to you now. So you don't feel like talking right now?

– Well, not really. And it's always the nights that is the hardest. Can I have your phone number so I can call when I'm not able to sleep because of that I ponder too much?

– Ooh, oh well. It can get a bit complicated, I don't have night duty. But at any time of the day when I'm here then just ask for me.

– So you only care about me during the day, when you get paid for it? Then you ignore me like everybody else?

– Well, of course I care about you. I'm really worried about you, that you should know. My greatest desire is that you should feel better soon.

– But you care about me just during working hours, that is.

– Of course not. But ... Well ... evenings ... then I have a family too, so ...

– Thank you for *not* caring. I will contact you when I feel like puking on you.

She turned around and put the headphones from her phone into her ears. Doctor Freeman realized that ha was cut off so he left. Ashley closed her eyes and focused on the music as her habit was nowadays. The singer was her favorite artist, named “Lisa”. She was a fairly new singer with an amazing voice and unusual instruments. Somehow she always was comforted by her emotional lyrics.

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Later in the evening both her parents came to visit. Judith had insisted that her husband would also be there. Maybe it was a father figure Ashley was looking for, and Ashley had always been closer to him. He had always defended her while Judith was more strict, and it had caused several quarrels between him and Judith. Ashley seemed to be asleep, so they began to discuss what they should do. Judith insisted that she must have come to some sort of rehabilitation centre where they were experts in suicidal persons. Joel said they could not afford it as the hospital bills were already crippling their economy and a rehab centre should be even much more expensive.

– Do you seriously mean that money is more important than our daughter? And you have always been the one who defended her.

– Of course she is the most important thing for me, but we are not of much help if our economy crashes either. Also, I think the only thing she needs is to come home to us and to a well-known and safe environment. There we can watch over her and give her all our support and love.

– How can we protect her at home? What if she tries to kill herself again, are you prepared to take that risk?

– We can hide everything that can be dangerous, and then keep monitoring her. An environment like this doesn’t make anyone happy, but at home she can get to know that life goes on and that she has two parents who love her above everything.

The discussion became more and more heated as they thought Ashley was sleeping. In fact, she had been listening and began to make a new plan. It was ap-

parently her father she had to process to come home. And if she came home, she would probably be able to find a knife somewhere in the house.

So she pretended to wake up and turned against them. They immediately stopped talking and turned towards her with serious faces. Ashley could not understand that they didn't realize what was best for her! She asked her mom get something to drink for her so she'd be alone with her father. She began working him hard that he had to get Mom to understand that she just needed to come home to feel good.

– I talked with a psychologist this morning, and he explained that I just need a little therapy and exercise to feel good again.

She nagged and broke down what little resistance he could muster and got him on "her" side. She had always been an expert on that.

The next few weeks the quarrels between her parents increased more and more. Joel argued that they must take their daughter home otherwise she would never get better. Judith thought she would be on a rehabilitation clinic for depressed. Ashley called her dad at work every day and wept at how evil she thought her mother was for locking her in an enclosed place like this. He was like butter in her hands, and he believed everything she said. He went hard at Judith and finally she agreed to let Ashley come home after a huge argument in which Joel threatened to leave her if he didn't get what he wanted. Judith asked the psychologist, but he referred only to his confidentiality, but still verified that he had talked with Ashley.

A week later, Ashley finally came home after having spent over four weeks in the hospital. Her parents had gone through every room in the whole house, including the garage and removed, locked in or hidden everything that she could hurt herself with. There was nothing in the house that could be used to commit suicide, and Judith and Joel adjusted their work schedules so that always one of them would be at home. Ashley seemed overjoyed to get home and rolled straight into her room and played her music. Lisa, of course. She realized that there would not be any sharp tools accessible. Even the food knives had been replaced by some others who could barely cut through a boiled potato. She saw that all kitchen

knives was laid in an upper cabinet that was hanging too high for her to have a chance reaching them.

After an hour, she joyfully told them that she had to go to the bathroom. Her father was shaving the old-fashioned way with razor blades. But the razor blade was so well encapsulated so it was impossible to cut with them more than perhaps a fraction of an inch. But she sat in the bathroom and fingered and fingered until she managed to break the blade capsule. Then she slid down to the floor to avoid the risk of making noise, and collected herself.

This time she managed the cut herself the first time and also without screaming, she just groaned a little bit of pain. She lay still on the floor with endorphins filling her mind with happiness from that she finally would meet all of her goals. To her horror, she heard her mom knock on the door asking what she was doing because she had been in there so long. When she didn't answer she forced Joel to break open the door from the outside and then they found her in the middle of a large pool of blood. She was already almost unconscious from the loss of blood but could see her parents' faces before she went out. Judith's eyes glowed as she looked at Joel, who had collapsed on the floor in shock. Without a word to him, Judith quickly put on a pressure bandage and then she lifted Ashley by herself out to the car with the help of the wheelchair and drove into the hospital again.

When Judith came home late that night, Joel had cleaned up in the bathroom and sat crying in the kitchen.

– Those razor blades are child proof! It should be impossible to do what she did! It's not my fault, please, I love her as much as you!

Judith didn't say a word but went into the bedroom and closed the door hard behind her. Joel went with slumped shoulders and lay on the couch in the living room but he could not sleep a wink all night. He was brooding over the situation and thought that everything seemed completely hopeless.

Meanwhile, Ashley woke up in the hospital again, at the same department. She screamed so loud that the staff came running to give her a sedative syringe again. They started to become too accustomed to her mood swings. She screamed that she hated her mother that she hated the hospital and everyone in there.

The took several days before Ashley calmed down somewhat again. She continued to brood more and more on her situation and tried to figure out how she could kill herself. Days went by and she didn't get any new ideas on what she should do. The staff of the department was constantly monitoring her and her mother had become firm and didn't believe anything she said anymore. She asked for her father, and said that she wanted him to come for a visit.

– Your dad's not in the picture anymore. He left the day before yesterday and only left a farewell note. I have no idea where he is, and I don't care about it anymore. He has never supported me.

Ashley saw that her mother was not completely honest, as she wiped her eyes. It was quite clear that she was sad that her father had left her. "Oh my God, now I've ruined her marriage too. Is there more I can destroy? ".

It sure was.

At the end of the month, the bills came, including the ones from the hospital. Judith realized that without Joel's salary there was not a chance that she would be able to have Ashley on this special department for very long. She didn't want to borrow on the house either, because they already had loans on the house that she wasn't sure that she could pay with just her own salary. She investigated the possibilities to put Ashley in rehab she really wanted, but had to accept that the harsh economic realities made it impossible.

Meanwhile, Ashley continued with her plans. She felt sure that there was no chance to fool her mother again, and Dad was gone. So she started furiously to try to dupe the department's psychologist instead. She still had her phone, so she was looking for information on the Internet about what psychologists were looking for during therapy sessions and then she lied unrestrained to him about her feelings. The psychologist was not so accustomed to suicide cases, so after a short while he fell into her trap.

It still took almost two months before the psychologist was convinced that Ashley had "processed" her problems and were "cured". Judith was not as convinced, but allowed the hospital to release Ashley nevertheless, pressed as she was from her

financial situation. She could simply not afford to keep her in the hospital without borrowing more than she thought she could pay.

– Are you sure that you have overcome your dark thoughts now, darling? she asked on the way home. Dr. Freeman says you answered well on his treatment.

Judith wanted so much to believe it herself.

– I promise, Mom! I feel much better now, especially when Dad is not here to argue with you anymore. It will be just you and me, Mom. Just you and me! Isn't that going to be just wonderful?

– Yes, it will be nice. Dad is not around to make problems anymore.

– I know, how amazing isn't that?

Judith was still unsure but had accepted that she had no choice. Ashley seemed really happy when she finally came home. She chirped like a bird, and spoke eagerly of returning to school. Judith felt relieved that she finally got through her depression. In the evening she said goodnight to Ashley who smiled and said "see you tomorrow" to her.

But at three o'clock at night she crept completely silent into the kitchen with her wheelchair. She got hold of a knife from the cabinet where she had seen her mother hide them by gently lifting herself up onto the bench with her arms and then with the help of a stepladder that she placed on top of the bench stretch up to get the knife. Then she listened carefully to make sure she was the only one awake. She lay flat on the floor and then cut her wrist without a single sound. It did hurt as much as it always had done, but by now she was used to it and almost enjoyed the pain as it took her mind off the pondering.

She laid there on the floor and saw how the blood from the wrist sprayed over the chair, drawers, refrigerator and everything else. She enjoyed as much that her mum would have to work hard to clean everything that she enjoyed the feeling of life seep away slowly, and she lay down to rest on the floor and fell asleep.

Judith had woken up with a pounding heart. She didn't understand why but she couldn't stop thinking about Ashley. She went up from the bed to look into

Ashley's room to check on her. She was surprised when Ashley was not in her bed and started looking for her. The shock when she came into the kitchen was about to make her give up. All this blood everywhere! And in the middle of the mess was Ashley and seemed to sleep with a big smile. She pulled herself together, and did as she almost become accustomed. This time she didn't, however, care about the potential costs.

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When Ashley woke up, the sun came through the window. She screamed in disappointment. How had it been possible for Mom to find her this time? "She have really decided to make my life hell, or what?" she thought. She looked around. Something had changed! All the furniture was plastic with no hard edges, the window had a screen, and the wheelchair was not next to the bed anymore. Both the floor and walls looked almost padded and the door was closed. This was not the hospital!

She was looking for her cell phone, but found nothing in the table drawer. Then she slipped down from the bed to the floor and landed remarkably softly. She dragged herself to the door as her wheelchair was gone and pulled the handle to get out. The door was locked! What was this for a prison? She went crazy and decided to tear up the wound on the wrist and began to take off the bandage, but it was taped with some sort of tenacious tape that she could not get a grip on. She tried to bite but not even that helped. She pulled up to the table to overturn it, but it was stuck to the floor and everything was padded and smooth. It was nothing she could do!

She shouted angrily and hit the table in frustration. When she looked down at herself as she realized that her clothes were also gone and she was wearing some sort of hospital nightgown. There was nothing at all of her things in the room. She roared with anger, poured down the bedclothes on the floor, threw the pillow to the wall and started banging her hands and head in the table legs.

It only took a few seconds until the door opened and a young, male caretaker in white clothes came in and closed the door behind him.

– Good morning, Miss Cox. My name is Larry. Nice that you have woken up. You have not eaten anything since you came here from the hospital yesterday afternoon because you have not been awake, so I suppose you are hungry. Can I offer something, breakfast perhaps?

– What the hell is this kind of a place that Mom has locked me into?!?

– This is Princeton House Behavioral Health, and you are in a department for those who feel extra sad. Here we can offer you help with your depression to make you feel better.

– This is some kind of psychiatric prison for wackos, right?

Ashley was shocked all the way into her injured spinal cord. This time Mom had finally gone too far! She would never forgive her for this! Larry sat down on the floor beside her. Ashley pulled away a little, but was still grateful that he came down to her level. It was tough having to look up at him.

– This is a closed psychiatric clinic, but it's just for your own safety that the door is locked. You are free to go, or maybe roll around in the department. There is a cafeteria and a library in addition to a small gym where you can train yourself rehabilitative. The only thing you need is someone to go with you. Just call on me and I will help.

– Why would I want to ask you for help, your idiot! You are a part of this fucking institution yourself!

Larry calmly sat on the floor talking to her without allowing himself to be provoked. Ashley was surprised that he took the time to just sit here with her. She was accustomed to everyone she met always was in a hurry. But Larry just sat there completely relaxed as if he had nothing else to do. He also showed remarkable patience, even though she was just mean and swore at him. Finally he said:

– Come now, I'll help you up in bed again. Then I will show how the controls work so you can choose whether you want to sit or lay down. If you need something, you only need to press the green button there.

He quickly made up the bed and then stretched down for her. She let herself passively to be helped into the bed but hardly listened to when Larry explained that the bed could serve as chair too. She looked around.

– My phone! Give me my phone! Otherwise I'll scream until I get it!

– You get it if you honestly say what you intend to use it for, miss Cox.

– To hell with you. I hate you too. Just give me my phone so I can at least listen to my favorite artist!

He didn't like her tone of voice or attitude, but he was not the kind of person that allowed himself be provoked. Instead, he asked her with a friendly voice:

– Can I offer you something else at the same time, miss Cox? Something to drink perhaps? Water? Milk? Juice?

Ashley grunted little in approval to the last proposal, so Larry fetched a plastic cup with juice for her and also gave her the phone. She snatched it from him, put the headset into her ears and lay herself demonstratively with her back to him and started listening to Lisa as usual.

– Now remember that you just have to press the button if you want something else, Miss Cox.

– Call me Ashley damn it. Just beat it! I don't want any company!

– Of course, Ashley. Just let me know if you need anything.

He smiled again and walked towards the door. Ashley looked after him and then suddenly she said with the same irritated tone:

– Larry!

– Yes, Ashley?

Larry turned around and smiled. Then said Ashley with a much softer tone:

– Thanks.

Larry smiled again at her and walked out.

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Shortly after lunch, that she refused to eat, the director of the rehabilitation centre, Jacob Graham, came in to her room. She turned around and looked at him without a word.

– Good morning, miss Cox. As I understood it you feel pretty bad, but you've come to the right place. We will all help you to feel better, you just wait and see. Before you know it, you've forgotten everything that makes you depressed and is back in school again. You are still going to school, I guess?

Ashley didn't answer. She just sat totally expressionless in bed with a blank face, not showing if she even heard what he just said.

– I hope that your room is to the satisfaction? Unfortunately we have to keep the doors locked in this section for reasons of safety, but if you want something, you just press the green button next to the bed and someone will help you instantly with anything, within certain limits, of course. Already the day after tomorrow we will start with your therapy sessions. It tends to do wonders to speak out about ones problems. Isn't it true that you want to feel better?

Jacob waited a long time to get a response from her. Finally, she replied sourly.

– How can I feel better in a prison?

– This is not a prison. You are admitted voluntarily to become healthy. Think of it as a kind of hospital for heart problems.

– Voluntary? So give me my clothes and I'll leave right here and now! I don't want to be here.

– Well, now it's not that simple. You are a minor and it's your mother who did put you here. You'll have to ask her about it. But give us a chance, I promise that you will soon feel better.

– That is exactly as I thought! She has dumped me here because she hates me and wants to punish me because my father pulled off. Give me a knife instead! I just want to die!

– That is exactly what we want to prevent. Suicide in never the answer. Instead we will show you that life is worth living.

– Fuck of, you don't understand anything!

Jacob was overcome with a bad feeling over the hopelessness in her words. He tried to find some words to cheer her up, but she had already turned around and put the headphones in their ears and turned up the sound. Finally, he accepted that she no longer listened so he let her be alone.

This girl would obviously be a real challenge for them! But not even his worst fears were adequate for what was to come.

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In the afternoon her mother came visit. She found out that Ashley had not eaten neither breakfast nor lunch, so this was the third day she hasn't got any food including the time in the hospital when she was unconscious. Judith brought a chair into the room and sat down beside the bed.

– Why don't you eat, darling? They claimed that you refuse all food.

She didn't expect the reaction she got. She had thought Ashley would ignore her as usual, but she sat up and looked at his mother with flaming eyes.

– What the hell have you done to me, Mom? Why have you locked me in this damn prison?

– This is a place where you can be healthy, honey. You will receive therapy and medications, and everything to feel better. Surly you want to feel better? But watch your tongue, young lady! I don't accept such a language, you know that!

– I don't give a shit. I hate you! Hate you, damn it! You're not my mother anymore. To the hell with you! I will never forgive you for this your fucking bitch. Can't you fucking let me die, for I don't ever want to live with you again, that you can be damn sure of! Just fuck off and never came back, because I can't stand to see your ugly face or hear your annoying voice anymore. Just beat it!

Judith was shocked to her core of the bitter, hateful words. She had never used such bad language before, but she understood that it was not the right time to reprimand her right now. Instead she tried to take Ashley's hand, but she snatched it back, and held both hands close to her body.

– Don't touch me! Don't you dare touch me again!

– But honey. You know I love you and will never leave you.

– You're lying, your devil! You hate me, but I hate you more! I don't want to see you more. You can collect my body when I'm done here. Just wait, I'll will find some way to take my life, in spite of that you put me in this damned prison.

– But, darling ...

– Don't call me that! I'm not your darling anymore. Can't you get that into your fat head, bitch?

Judith got a knot in her stomach that did really hurt. This was terrible! How could she help her daughter? "Oh, Joel, where are you when I need you?" She thought. At the same time, she know very well that her husband had never been a support mentally. She tried to calm down her daughter but Ashley just kept shouting and swearing in a language that Judith didn't even know she had and became increasingly hysterical. It was heard all the way out into the corridor so Larry came into the room.

– I heard someone screaming from here. Is there something wrong here?

– Can you remove this woman from my room, Larry? I can't stand to see her!

Larry walked up to Ashley and tried to calm her down, but without success. She screamed and swore and became redder and redder in her face. Judith also lost her temper from all the provocations and became aggressive and yelled at Ashley for her language and attitude. Larry looked worried at them both and tried to calm down the situation without success. They both shouted at each other and none of them listened to anything that Larry said.

But suddenly Ashley abruptly went silent, grabbed her chest and collapsed on the bed. It was like she had cramps and could not breathe and she gasped desperately for air. Larry felt her pulse and reacted quickly by going to the door pushing Judith in front of him.

– Can you be so kind and leave the room, mrs. Cox? I have to help your daughter now, before it's too late.

He pressed a red button at the door and an alarm went off in the hallway. Almost immediately a nurse came running with an emergency cart. Soon also a doctor came running through the doors of the department. He hurried into the room and investigated Ashley. She was given oxygen and was connected to a heart monitor. Larry was scared when he saw that Ashley's pulse was irregular, but with peaks of over 230. He took her hand and made an effort to sound calm when he spoke to her.

– Try to breathe calmly, Ashley. It's just you, me, a nurse and a doctor in the room now. You need to calm down, your heart is about to freak out.

– Pain, she gasped, I have so much pain in the chest. Help me, Larry!

– Can you give her some painkillers? Larry asked.

The doctor took out a syringe and grabbed Ashley's arm but she just shrugged it back.

– Your doctor will give you a shot for the pain, you must relax a little.

Larry grabbed Ashley's arm and the nurse could give her the shot. He continued to talk reassuringly to her and slowly her pulse dropped to more normal values.

Meanwhile Judith approached Jacob and complained that she been so rudely treated by Larry. When Jacob came up to the room, he saw the red light and the emergency cart and realized that something serious had happened. He walked carefully in order not to disturb them and asked for a status report. The nurse gave a brief report and he then went out to Judith again.

– Your daughter has apparently got a minor heart attack because she was too upset. The routine at serious health conditions are the same here as in hospitals, and it is that relatives are asked to leave the room so they will not interfere with the medical treatment. I'm sorry if it was perceived as harsh, but I guess that Larry was stressed by the acute situation and forgot about diplomacy.

– Do you think I will be able to see her more today?

– Unfortunately, I have to suggest that you wait until another day, so she gets a chance to calm down first.

Judith sighed heavily but accepted that it was better that way. She left the centre with very heavy steps. She was a long way from giving up, but decided that she had to come every day, even if Ashley didn't want it. For when she would eventually begin to feel better, she would remember that her mother had never given up.

So the next day Judith came back and went into Ashley' room again. This time, she didn't reacted at all, seemingly, and she had her back turned to the visitor's chair that Judith had brought in. Judith tried to hug her, but she just pulled away and wagged like if she wanted to chase away a fly. Ashley pushed the button and soon Larry came entered the room and asked what she wanted.

– Larry, you could be so kind as to throw that woman out again? She insists on coming back for some reason.

Larry looked at Judith with a sad face. He sat on the other side of the bed so he could watch Ashley's face. Gently, he took her hand and spoke to her with a very soft voice. He tried to get her to realize that he could not ask Judith to go, because it was her mother. Ashley continued talking with a angry voice to Larry that she didn't want the "bitch" to be there. Judith reacted by complaining loudly about the whole situation, and screamed that she certainly was not going to abandon her daughter. Larry spoke very quietly, almost inaudibly with Ashley who was breathing heavier and heavier. Then suddenly Larry rose up and said with a firm voice to Judith that she must go out of the room now. Judith flared up but still went out.

Larry stayed a few minutes and then went out. There, he told Judith that he had felt Ashley's pulse as he held her hand, and that it was about to rush up again. Judith looked at him in surprise. She had not understood that Larry had a concrete reason why he held Ashley's hand. Then Larry explained that it was very important right now that Ashley didn't lose confidence in him, because she seemed to shut out all the others. Judith felt angry and said she understood but she still must be allowed to see her own daughter. But in the end, she gave up and left the department while Larry returned to Ashley.

– Ashley, he said softly. You need to understand that I can't prevent her from coming here. Whether you think that she is your mother or not, she is your legal guardian. So, theoretically, she can come here with the police and demand that I be arrested if I hinder her to visit you. That's not what you wont, is it?

Ashley turned her reddish face towards him and began to protest. But Larry continued to ease her without once raising his voice, even though Ashley almost shouted at him. He sat there a long time talking patiently with her. In the end, his persistence was rewarded with that she calmed down a bit.

– Larry, you're the only one here who is decent, so I don't want to mess things up for you. She may well come then, but don't think I will say a single word to her ever again! And tell her to never try to touch me again!

Larry promised it and left the room with a head full of thoughts. How would this go? Would the therapy the next day help her? He found it hard to concentrate on his other tasks the rest of the day.

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CHAPTER 3

# Rehab centre



Ashley sat looking sour in her wheelchair when a middle-aged man came into the room and started talking with a forced cheerful tone.

– Hello everyone! I'm glad to see you all here again. Before we begin with this group session, as there are some newcomers here, let's take some of the rules first. The first rule is that in this room we are always honest. No lies or half-truths. Then we respect each others, we all have similar problems. And only bright

thoughts in this room. We start this group therapy by all saying our first names and a few words about why we are here. My name is Micheal and is a licensed psychologist to help you through this.

Everyone in the room was sitting in chairs or wheelchairs in a circle in the middle of the room. They took turns introduced themselves and briefly explaining their problems. When the turn came to Ashley she just looked straight ahead with a blank face and didn't say a word. Michael tried to entice her to say something.

– You don't have to say anything more than your first name, this first time.

Compact silence.

– This will not work unless we all are talking, so please tell us your first name, at least.

She still refused to say anything so finally Micheal let the turn go forth. Soon, everyone started talking about everything except Ashley that was still silent. After a while the topic in on what everyone wanted to do in the future and they all talked excitedly about dreams, both realistic and unrealistic that they had. Michael tried again and addressed Ashley.

– You have not said what you dream about. Sure, you have also thought about your future? What do you dream about?

Ashley just kept silent. Several of the others began to eagerly lure her to say something, and finally she opened her mouth.

– My only dream is to kill myself and my future is to be buried in the ground. The sooner the better.

– Hey, Micheal protested. Only bright ideas in this room!

– It's a bright idea, for me at least! I want to die! So that's my bright thoughts! Shouldn't we be honest, or what? Give me a knife and I'll fix it myself. Let me just die so I can become happy.

Many in the circle were themselves, or had been, suicidal and started to feel sick by her words. Michael saw it and tried to stop her.

– That's enough! You make everyone feel bad here.

– So it doesn't matter how I feel? I want to die! Let me die then so you can all feel good afterwards. Don't you understand me? Give me a knife or a rope or a jar of pills or whatever. The sooner I die the better for everyone.

The mood in the group was getting really restless and several began to cry from their own memories and Micheal began to yell at Ashley and by that destroyed all his chances of ever reaching her. In the end, he called for a caregiver who drove her out while she continued to scream that she didn't want to live anymore. The atmosphere in the room became very subdued and Micheal realized that many weeks of work had been spoiled in just minutes. This group therapy would definitely not work for Ashley.

Ashley's day went extremely slow. She was not allowed to move freely without someone with her, so she just stayed in her room. The only thing she could entertain herself with was the phone so she just listened to music, and it was still only Lisa that she listened to.

Right after lunch, which she still left untouched, she was going to have her first therapy session directly with the psychologist. Larry rolled Ashley into the psychologist's consulting room. There was a large desk with a nameplate that read "Micheal", but no visitor chairs. However, there was a couch against the wall with the head close to the desk. But Ashley refused to move from the wheelchair so Larry left the room. She also didn't take the hand that Michael reached out across the table. She just sat hunched in the wheelchair, looking down.

– So, now go ahead and lie down on the couch so we can get started. If you need help to move so I can ask someone to help you as Larry seemed to be busy.

Ashley didn't move.

– Well, I understand that the wheelchair is a comfort zone for you. But for the therapy to be effective, you have to leave your comfort zone to make it easier to open up.

She still showed no signs of wanting to move. But when he said "comfort zone" she looked up at him with an angry facial expression and then look down again.

– Now lay yourself down onto the couch, Ashlee, otherwise I'll get someone to do it for you. Do you understand!?!

Micheal tried to sound angry to get a reaction, but he shouldn't have done that because now Ashley freaked out completely. She screamed and threw herself down on the floor next to the chair.

– What the fuck, don't you even know my name? Comfort zone, eh. Here's your damn comfort zone! The wheelchair is my hate object, I hate it! Got it?

She lifted the chair and threw it at the table, but was not strong enough to get it to fly over, but it bounced off the front of the table. She wriggled across the floor and got hold of Micheal's shoes and threw them at him. She hit him right on his forehead with the second shoe so that he fell backwards from his chair. Now he had become really afraid of her outburst and started shouting for help. But it would be even worse before anyone reached the room. She took a umbrella which was also lying there and threw the tip first against the glass in the door and shattered the glass pane. Then she crawled across the floor to the glass shards and got hold of a large piece which she held in her right hand while she tried to cut her wrist with it.

She started to bleed in her right hand from gripping the glass so hard, but she didn't seem to care. She was just trying to find an edge that was sharp enough to cut off blood vein in the left wrist but were prevented by the bandage still sitting there from last suicide attempt. Several caregivers came in and started wrestling with her to get her to release the shard. She fought and screamed while they tried to pin her down to the floor. She was waving dangerously with the hand holding the glass and one of the caregivers got a cut. Finally, a doctor came running with a syringe and with joint effort they succeeded to give it to her. She went out quickly and then Micheal exhaled and wiped some sweat from his forehead. Then the caregivers carried her back to her bed and took care of her wounds while Micheal conferred with the doctor about what to do.

When Judith came a few hours later she was stopped by Jacob who told her everything that happened in connection with therapy.

– I have, unfortunately, not a complete report yet, as both the psychologist and one of the caregivers who intervened had to go to the hospital because of a concussion and lacerations.

– You can't seriously imply that my daughter is responsible for that two of your staff has been injured!

– Unfortunately, it's the truth. We have given her sedatives, for both her own and our staff's safety.

Judith looked at him doubtfully and then went to look for Larry instead. She found him in a storage room.

– Larry, I hope that I can call you that, because I don't know your last name. First I would like to apologize to you for having been brusque towards you. The problem is that I'm so frustrated right now and on the verge of collapse, so I'm not myself.

– No problem, I understand your frustration. I would definitely not like to be in your position right now, I don't know if I would be able to cope with it myself.

– I wonder if you think I dare to visit my daughter today?

– Hopefully it will go well. I had a long discussion with her yesterday, after you had gone and she eventually accepted visits from you. But she asked me to say that she doesn't want you to touch her. In addition, she received a sedative today, so she might be less aggressive now.

Judith sighed heavily, thanked him and went into the room. Ashley felt like she was floating above the bed and like she was outside her body. When she tried to move, I felt like it was a foreign body that moved. The feeling was really unpleasant and she had felt like that since she had awakened after the syringe. Judith tried to talk to her, but then she reached for her phone, put the headphones in her ears, started Lisa's music and set the volume to maximum. So Judith sat there and looked at her, bubbling with frustration. She tried to talk to her but realized that the music was probably too high for her to hear anything. How many times had she not told her daughter to take out the headphones when she wanted to talk to her? It felt as if Ashley was trying to provoke her.

Judith understood that she however could not allow herself to be provoked, so instead she went quiet and just looked at her daughter. It seemed obvious that Ashley had any kind of problem, because she moaned and sobbed almost continuously. After a while she pressed the button and soon Larry entered the room and asked Judith if she was the one who had pressed the alarm. She shook her head so he asked instead Ashley what she wanted. Only then she took the headphones from her ears.

– Larry, can you hold me? The whole room is spinning and it feels like I'm floating in the air. I'm so scared!

He looked at Judith with surprise. She made a grimace but nodded. Then he folded his arms around Ashley who held him almost desperation.

– Don't leave me, Larry! It's so horrible, you have to stay here, she cried. I can't stand this without you. Please, stay here!

He sat for a long time and kept holding Ashley while her mother looked on with a rising sense of unease. How was it that her daughter would rather have a stranger hug her and comfort her, when she herself was in the room? Why didn't she need her mother instead? Finally Ashley released her grip and thanked him.

– Thank you, I'm a bit tired now and will try to get some sleep.

Larry left the room with mixed feelings with an apologetic look towards Judith. He felt so sad for Ashley and felt at the same time so helpless. She still had not eaten anything since she got there. Judith understood she wouldn't get any contact with her and went after a while. Ashley had fallen asleep so she gave her a hug anyway before she left the room.

A few hours later, Larry came back into her room with a nurse to give her the medicines. By now she was awake again and she felt much better. The room had finally stopped spinning so Ashley accepted the drugs from the nurse and the glass with juice that Larry gave her and swallowed the tablets.

To her despair, she soon started soon feel dizzy again and the room spun as before. When she desperately called on Larry but another caretaker came and told

her that Larry had gone home for the day. She cried herself to sleep that night of utter despair.

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The following day was Saturday, and then someone else came into the room in the morning.

– Where's Larry? she asked.

– Larry only works on weekdays and it's Saturday today. My name is Evelyn and will take care of you during the weekend. Here is your breakfast and your medications. I have to stay here and to see that you are taking the pills, then you can eat in peace.

Ashley hit the tray so that the food and medicine flew all over the place. Evelyn got scared and backed off a few steps.

– NO, she screamed. I refuse to take that medicine! It makes me feel bad. Besides, I'm not hungry.

– You must in any case take your medicine. It's for your own good.

– Never ever! You can't make me! Let me be alone now!

Ashley looked so furious that Evelyn didn't dare to continue to insist so she left without picking up. But soon she came back with two strong, male carers. She showed a new plastic cup with pills for Ashley.

– Are you going to take your medication voluntarily, or do we have to force you?

Ashley shouted something obscene back as the two carers held her arms and head. Evelyn pressed her nose until she opened her mouth reflexively to get air. Evelyn then quickly poured the tablets inside with a splash of water. One of the cares kept a hand over her mouth until she swallowed several times. Then they released her.

She roared with anger and tried to hit and scratch them but they backed quickly towards the door. Then she threw herself against them dragging most of the

bedding with her. When they were on their way out of the door she looked for something to throw and finally grabbed her phone and threw it with all her strength against them but only hit the inside of the closed door. The phone display broke and shattered glass rained over her. She continued to scream and crawl around on the floor and hitting the walls until the medicine caused her to fall asleep.

Judith came earlier this day since her weekend job as a waitress didn't begin until in the afternoon. She found Ashley crouched on the floor in a corner of the room with neither blanket, pillow or anything else. Her hospital clothing was in disarray and she was shaking from cold. There was complete chaos in the room with food on the floor, bed clothes everywhere and the mobile phone was at the door with broken glass. Around it was still broken glass and Ashley was bleeding from several small cuts the she got by crawling around among the shards of glass.

She rushed out into the corridor completely furious and demanded to speak to someone in charge. Jacob happened to be there to fill in some reports and he asked what happened.

– My daughter is laying down on the floor surrounded by broken glass and the whole room looks like a hurricane raged there! What's going on in this place, anyway? I thought I could trust this centre, but apparently not!

Jacob hurried out and called a couple of carers and they went all into Ashley's room. Jacob was also shocked by the sight and started to scold the carers flat out. One of them immediately began to sweep up the glass and pick up everything from the floor while the other is made up on the bed again. Jacob looked at the phone and put it into his pocket. They lifted the sleeping Ashley up into the bed again and then Jacob apologized to Judith for the incident and promised it would never happen again with a harsh look straight at the caretakers who didn't dare other than to nod.

Then Jacob looked at Ashley's broken phone. It seemed to be intact except for the crushed screen. He located a trainee, Max, and asked him if he knew where it was possible to repair the phone quickly.

– It should probably be possible, if you go to a small shop that I know of. They usually fix phones within a few hours. I got my phone fixed there once.

– Can you please take this phone and have it fixed until Monday? Unless you're here tomorrow? You will of course get back all your expenses.

– I'll take care of the, Max replied and took the phone. Who does it belong to and why is there such a rush.

– It belongs to Ashley in room twelve. She always listens to music from it and it seems to be the only thing that calms her down, and believe me, she needs a lot of calming down right now.

Judith sat in Ashley's room for a while until Ashley woke up. She was as dizzy and nauseous as the night before. She looked confusedly around and caught sight of her mother. Angrily, she turned her back to her and looked for her phone without finding it. Then she remembered what happened to it and began crying uncontrollably instead. Judith tried to console but had to give up and go to her other job otherwise she would be late.

When Max saw that Judith had left, he went in to Ashley with worried steps. She was still crying in her bed.

– Ashley, excuse me? My name is Max and was told that you always listen to music in your phone. Jacob gave me your phone, and I will try to get it fixed until Monday. But here, you can borrow my music player for a while. I have uploaded all the music from your phone to it for you

Ashley didn't say a word, it even seemed as if she hadn't heard him. He put his music player on the table and slipped out of the room again. When he had gone, she took yet the music player and put the headphones in her ears and started listening to Lisa. She soon stopped crying.

When it was time to take the drugs again Evelyn brought her help again and they had to force her to take it the same way as before. The same thing happened the following day. Every time they got back to the room after half an hour to clean up the chaos that it became. They were very careful not to let Jacob know anything.

When Larry came in on Monday morning as he was delayed by Jacob who wanted to inform him of what has happened over the weekend. When he finally came into Ashley's room, Evelyn was already there to force Ashley to take the medicines. Larry was shocked when he saw two men holding her while she shouted at them. Has roared from the first emotion that Ashley seen from him ever.

– What the hell are you doing! Release the girl immediately!

– She refuses to take her medication, and she has to take them. Let us do our job!

– OUT. Get out of here! he screamed. I can give her the medicines. Just release her and leave!

Larry grabbed one of the cares and got him to release Ashley. His face was dark red with rage and his fists was clenched. None of them had seen him so angry before, so they dared nothing else than to leave the room. Ashley fell into tears and threw her arms around him.

– Larry, where where you when I needed you? They are so horrible with me, I hate them all! You can't imagine what terrible things they have done!

He held her and spoke calming to her. Jacob came into the room with the carers who alerted him that Ashley was violent again and that Larry was alone with her. When he saw that Ashley was hugging him crying and was not the least bit violent, he silently signed to the carers to leave. Then he gave Ashley's phone to Larry, whispered something in his ear and went. Eventually, she released her grip on him and tried to wipe her tears.

Larry sat and talked with her for a long time, trying to comfort her. Slowly she began to calm down, thanks to Larry's almost endless patience. However she continued to refuse to take the medication even though he was trying to ease with her. After nearly an hour, he suddenly remembered that he had her phone in his pocket.

– Here's the your phone back, by the way. Jacob has let it be fixed over the weekend. Apparently you threw it against the wall.

– I missed that bitch and hit the door. They want to give me medicine which I refuse. It makes me feel so bad, why can't they understand it?

– I understand that. You have realized that it's not me who decided that you should take it, or what medicine you should have?

– It's fairly obvious, Larry. I'm not stupid, you know.

– Of course you're not stupid, you're just not quite yourself right now. But if you don't take your medications, so they will eventually force you again. And I will try to stop them by force, and then Jacob will have to fire me. Believe me that I don't care if he will, because I can always find another job. But then it gets worse for you, then I'm not here to help you anymore. I would not like that, because I really care about you.

– Well, alright, Larry. I'll take my stupid pills then, just for you. But just because it's you and I don't want to mess things up for you, for you are the only one here who is nice to me. I really don't want you to lose the job, because then who will help me?

– Actually, I don'l like to give you the medicine any more you want to take it. But I'm glad that you agree to it so we both don't have to get into trouble.

– But before I take it, can you please ask Max to come here?

Larry was surprised but went out in the hallway and found Max. He came into the room even more worried than the last time, as he had heard what had happened this weekend. But Ashley held out her hand towards him with his music player. When he took it so he pulled him closer and gave him a hug.

– Thank you, Max, for the loan. You really saved my weekend. Without you these days have been absolutely unbearable.

– You're welcome. I'm just happy to help you.

– And this is for you, Larry, she said then.

She took her medication herself and Larry smiled at her and thanked her. Then he held her until she fell asleep.

But Larry was still not satisfied. When it was time for lunch, he was back and sat for half an hour and talked to her and tried to get her to eat. So finally he was allowed to fetch food for her that she ate. Her stomach had ached since she came here, so it felt somewhat good to get something in her stomach. When her mother came that afternoon, she received the reassurance directly from Larry that Ashley had started to eat again and also took their medications without objection anymore. She sighed with relief and thanked Larry.

– You are a angel, Larry. I don't know how it would go for Ashley here without you.

~ ~ ~

The week passed and Larry had taken over giving medicine to Ashley. She complained every time, but he was more stubborn. Judith was fearing what would happen on Saturday, when Larry was off duty again.

On Saturday morning, Evelyn came into the room with the male caretakers to give the drugs to her. She screamed and threw herself down on the floor and crawled under the table, trembling with fear. Evelyn knelt down and yelled at her while the carers tried to pull her out, but she held on to a table leg and continued to scream.

Suddenly, Larry entered the room and told them to leave the room with a voice that did not accept any protests. Evelyn looked at him in surprise, but gave him the mug with tablets and left the room with the carers. Larry put the mug on the table and helped Ashley out from under the table. She put her arms around him and wept.

– Larry, save me! You have to save me! I'm so scared, and that woman is so horrible, and she does terrible things to me. Please, Larry, don't leave me!

He sat a long time left on the floor and held her until she finally stopped shaking. Then he helped her up gently onto the bed again and sat there and talked reassuringly to her for a long while. Then Ashley remembered what weekday it was.

– What are you actually doing here, Larry? You are not supposed to work today?

– I came here to give you your medications, then I will go home again. But I will come back in the afternoon, so don't worry. You should never need to be force-fed with the tablets anymore.

– Hey, you can't come in on your day off just because I'm a pain in the ass! You are so wonderful, Larry, you do actually care for me for real. Not like everyone else here who just pretend.

– Of course I care about you, Ashley. You know that!

– Yes, I know. Just because of that, I can't let you work seven days a week. You need to rest on weekends so that you can take care of me on weekdays. Can you call that bitch again, Larry? But just her. Please?

Larry was surprised but went looking for Evelyn and asked her to come back. She was as as puzzled as him about what Ashley wanted to say. He begged Evelyn to stay calm regardless of what Ashley would say, for her own sake, although it could be hard. Then they both went into the room again. Ashley was scared again, so Larry sat down on the edge of the bed and she grabbed his arm and turned to Evelyn.

– You're a really evil person, bitch! I hate you more than anyone else because you are really mean. I will never, never take any medications for your sake, just so you know it!

Evelyn really make an effort to not talk back. She just clenched her lips while Ashley continued.

– But I can't let Larry sacrifice his days off for it. He's the only one here who is kind and he also needs rest. So for his sake, I shall take your damn medications, if you just ask me nicely and don't bring those beefy caregivers each time.

Larry gave the cup back to Evelyn and pushed her a little in her side and gave her a warning glance. Evelyn was irritated from being called "bitch", but controlled herself with an effort and did her best to smile kindly.

– Please Ashley, you can take your medicines here?

Ashley grabbed the mug and swept in the tablets, drank some juice and opened her mouth, so Evelyn could inspect that she swallowed them.

– Satisfied now, bitch?

– Yes, Ashley, now I'm satisfied.

– Are you satisfied, Larry?

– You know, Ashley, I will not be satisfied until you are happy again.

– Did you hear that, bitch? Larry really care about me while you only care about your pathetic job!

Evelyn just grunted something unintelligible and went out again.

– Go home now, Larry, and forget about me until Monday. You need the rest. Then you can pick up the debris of me again after the weekend.

– I'm going home now, Ashley, but I will not forget you. Here is a note with my private cell phone number so you can call me if anyone gets nasty to you again.

– Thanks, Larry. I love you!

And so it became. Ashley stopped making trouble when Evelyn came with the medicine. But she didn't swallow the tablets. Instead she found a method to secretly hide them in her cheek until Evelyn left and then spit them out. She hid them in her tissues in the trash bin so that no one would discover that she didn't take them. She didn't want to fool Larry so on Monday so she told him that she didn't want him to give the drugs anymore. So the nurse continued to provide the pills and Ashley continued to spit them out.

So Ashley no longer took any medication but continued to attend daily therapy in Micheal's office, but now he dared no longer claim that she should lie down. He tried to get her to open up, but she didn't utter a single word in his sessions. She just sat there and ignored him, which was only slightly better than throwing shoes at him. Sometimes it demonstratively brought a pillow, laid down on it pretending to sleep against the armrest. Micheal began to despair of his ability to help her.

But Judith didn't give up but continued to come every day after work. Ashley didn't say a word to her either and seemed not even be aware that she was there. Judith assumed it was due to the medicines she was given, because the doctor had said that they continued to adjust it to try to achieve success. What none of them knew was that she was no longer took the tablets. But she played as if she were still completely gone so nobody would suspect anything.

Weeks went by and became a month. She was feeling worse and worse because she in fact didn't received any treatment at all. Nights were a long awakened nightmare for her when she brooded and tried to come up with some method to kill herself. But all the caretaker and the other personnel were on their heels and gave no opening but she bided her time. "One day..." she was thinking.

~ ~ ~

In the morning on a Friday Larry told Ashley that it would be a speech in the lecture hall about how it's to live as crippled and that everyone had to listen.

– Do I have to be there, Larry? It seems boring to listen to some jerk talk about something he don't know anything about.

– It's mandatory, you see. You know what? I actually think you will enjoy it, Larry said with a peculiar smile.

So when it was time for the speech, Ashley and the others was rolled into a large lecture hall with a small stage at the front. Larry began to push her towards the stage, but she laid down both hands on the wheel and pointed to a spot at the back.

– It's better if you sit closer to the front, so that you can hear and see properly, he said, and began to roll her again.

Then she stuck her hands into the spokes of the wheelchair. It hurt when it came to a abrupt stop but she barely reacted to pain anymore. She looked angrily at him and refused to remove her hands.

– Alright then, you get to sit at the back then, he said, and then got to roll her to the place she pointed out.

Eventually everyone was there and Jacob went up on the stage to introduce the speaker. It was she! Oh my God, it was her idol Lisa that she always listened to on her phone! Lisa had extremely long hair that was colored light blue but Ashley knew that already. She also knew that Lisa was around thirty years old, slim and incredibly beautiful. But what she didn't have a clue about, and what shocked her deeply, was that Lisa also was sitting in a wheelchair! She could never have guessed that she one that she was listening to every day was crippled too.

– Hello, Lisa is my name, the forest is my habitat.

Ashley succeeded with an effort to collect herself from the shock that her idol was also bound to a wheelchair and did her utmost to act bored and blaze. But in fact she sharpened her ears and kept her eyes glued on Lisa's lips. Lisa began to Jacob's great despair to describe how difficult life has been for her. She called the wheelchair her worst enemy and said that it made her life a living hell!

Her words went straight into the heart of Ashley. My God, Lisa told her everything that she felt herself! She could not imagine that her idol herself had suffered the same problems as herself had.

Lisa went on to describe how hard life had been to her. She had been knocked to the ground many times, like when a drunk driver knocked her on a pedestrian crossing and left her on her back in a hospital bed, paralyzed from the waist down. She continued to vividly describe how she had previously been beaten by a tough guy in a café and she then lived in a hut in a forest with no more than a backpack with a few changes of clothes and not a single cent in her pocket.

– I was totally depressed and rolled me in the bitterness over my destiny. The bitterness grew into a black, bottomless sea that I was on the verge of drowning in.

Ashley felt as if the entire floor sagged. It was exactly as she herself felt. In some magical way, she became one with her idol and everything else around her just disappeared. She leaned forward and waited impatiently on what Lisa would say next.

– But then I got a couple of true friends who gave me a kick in my butt so I took hold of my life. I used everything I had, feminine cunningness, my singing

voice, a lot of guts and even took advantage of that I had a decent body. Three months later I had earned my first million, converted to U.S. dollars. I namely managed to get myself a gig at the arena on Grimja where I pulled in nearly 33 000 people who listened to me. Since then I have earned several millions from records and tours.

There was a murmur through the crowd, but Ashley didn't hear it. All she could hear was Lisa who proceeded to tell an even more shocking news. Lisa had actually tried to kill herself when she was about Ashley's age.

– I guess it's several of you who thought of the idea to commit suicide, maybe some of you have already tried. Guess **they** have been trying to convince you that it's stupid. I'm taking about **they** who don't use a wheelchair. What do **they** know how it feels? Nothing, they understand nothing! But I understand.

Now it was totally silent in the room besides Jacob quietly groaning. Ashley tried really hard to look unmoved, but she sat and nodded inside. Everything she said was true! **They** don't get it, like Jacob, Michael, mother, Amy and the entire pack which has two working legs. But Lisa didn't belong to **them**, but she understood everything. My God, she really was her Idol.

Lisa then proceeded to talk about everything good that had happened to her after she was stopped from killing herself. She emphasized each word and it felt for Ashley as if Lisa looked and pointed straight at her.

– Think about it, next time you want to kill yourself. There is *always* a future, and *that* you want to experience, *believe* me! I *know*!

Ashley felt that Lisa punched her in the stomach with every word. My God, she sat up there and said the opposite of what Ashley herself knew. She was convinced that she didn't have any life anymore, but would forever be dependent on others. But there was Lisa, claiming the opposite. But Lisa's her Idol, and an Idol is never wrong! Lisa continued relentlessly to explain how she stood up when she was knocked down in a café and married the tough guy that hit her. She also rose up mentally when she ended up in a wheelchair and defeated her enemy, the wheelchair.

– Never let yourself be defeated by your enemies, fight for your life instead and start living again!

The applause was deafening and Jacob sighed with relief.

– I guess that **they** say to you all the time that you *can*. You *can* take care of yourselves. You *can* have a good life. You *can*. But **they** don't get it! "Can you? Can you make it?" It's the wrong question, so just ignore when **they** keeps talking about it! The question you must ask yourself is "Do I *want*?". "What do I *want* to do?" Once you know that, just do it. If you *want*, you *can*. Believe me, I know. I live that life every day. So start thinking about what you *want* now and then make sure to do it. Thanks for listening!

Following the speech, Lisa showed a few tricks with the wheelchair. She said it was important not to let anyone touch it, but always run it by oneself. The scene had a couple of steps that led up to it, and she just rolled down the stairs without a problem. Then she would get up the stairs again but fell down. One of the caretakers tried to help her, but then she yelled "DON'T TOUCH MY WHEELCHAIR!" then she pulled herself backwards instead up onto the stage, and made it seem so easy.

Ashley thought it was almost too easy so she snorted and said a dirty word. To her embarrassment as Lisa heard her word and asked if she had any questions. Ashley was taken by surprise and couldn't find anything to say bot:

– Hi, it is easy for you to sit there and brag. But for me it doesn't matter, the only thing I want is to die anyway, and it will happen as soon as these guards make a single mistake. That's the only thing that I long for.

Lisa tried to answer but was stopped by Jacob. Then she sang some of her popular songs and now Ashley really had to struggle to not look happy. Quite incredible that she were allowed to listen to Lisa singing in real life and also, sitting in a wheelchair. She was eager to sing along, but controlled herself.

After the show, Larry began to push her back to her room. To her surprise, Lisa rolled up to them in no time and spoke to her. Ashley was surprised how

quickly both Lisa had come down from the stage and rolled up with her. Even more surprised that Lisa actually had done it.

– Hi there. I'm a little concerned about what you said before. Don't you want to talk to me about it? Maybe it makes you feel a little better.

– Why? My life is already over. Worry about those who want to live instead!

– I care about you, for real. Believe me! Here, take my phone number. Call me when you feel sad and you will see that you will soon feel better. You may call at any time of day, I promise!

Ashley took the note Lisa gave her and then let herself be rolled away. She turned her head and saw how Jacob talked with Lisa while they looked down in her direction. She felt sure he was talking about herself with Lisa. Of course, he told her all the horrible details about her, and Lisa would never, ever take her call.

She sighed, but had begun to have a plan. There was a storage room a few doors down from her room which seemed to contain everything. Somehow, she would get in there.

Soon she would have solved her problem. She was dead sure of it. Literally!



CHAPTER 4

# Lisa



Ashley could not sleep that night either. She was so angry with herself that she had been cranky when she talked with Lisa. Here she got the world's best chance to talk to her idol, maybe get an autograph and she just ruin it! Damn that depression that only caused her to be angry and moody all the time! She picked out her phone out of her pocket to listen to some of Lisa's songs anyhow. She got up the paper with her phone number along with the phone.

She started listening to the familiar voice as she fingered the paper. Would she call? The watch on the phone showed that it was two o'clock in the night. No way that she can call a superstar in the middle of the night! But Lisa had in fact said that it was okay. Did she only say that to make her happy? Maybe she was like all the others who care only when they get paid for it? Maybe this phone number doesn't even belong to her? It was probably just a scam to make her feel better!

The phone began almost to feel heavy. Well, if she rang and Lisa just refused to talk like everyone else then she would lose faith in her. Who would she then listen to? But at the same time this it's a chance to talk to her idol. She sighed and hesitated but in the end she still dialed the number. Several signal went by before anyone answered.

– Hello, this is Lisa the familiar voice said.

Ashley gasped but didn't dare to say anything. Oh my God, there she was! It was actually her!

– So, if you are one of those bastard who just will breathe heavy in the handset then you may as well hang up immediately, Lisa said.

– Don't hang up, this is Ashley, she sobbed. I have so much pain, don't think I can handle it. What should I to do, everyone is just against me? The staff at this awful place has locked me in the room, and Mom doesn't care about me at all and Dad has just disappeared. My life is completely meaningless and I have no future at all. All I want is to take my life, but nobody lets me do that either. You claimed that you care about me, do you really?

Lisa became completely awakened. Oh my God, it was her! And it seemed apparently to be really bad with her. "What on earth can I do about it?" she thought.

– Of course I care about you. I've been worried about you since we met. I just forgot to take your phone number. Where are you hurting the most?

– I'm hurting everywhere. I have cut my wrist several times. But they have always found me to patch me up. I have so much pain in the wrist of all wounds. But mostly, I hurt inside.

– Where does it hurt, in the spine or? How were you injured by the way, was in a car accident as it was for me?

– It was no accident! A madman attacked me for no reason and stuck a knife in my back! It damaged my my nerves, so I will never be able to walk again. I'm always be an invalid and have no life anymore! Don't you get it!?! I have no life anymore! For all eternity, I'm a package, totally dependent on others. That's what hurts inside. It would be better if I were dead, but no one would let me kill myself, either. Not even Mom! I think she hates me and wants to punish me for the rest of my life!

Lisa got a hard knot in her stomach and became ice cold. Ashley sounded like she was completely destroyed and without any hope. This would become a difficult phone call, she realized immediately. so she dragged herself up into the wheelchair and rolled out into the living room so she would not wake her husband, Brago. Ashley heard the sounds of it and felt a bit guilty because she had obviously forced Lisa out of her bed.

– I understand exactly how you feel. For me it was a drunkard that broke my back, although I didn't do anything wrong. Life can be so unfair sometimes, you don't have to explain that. And do you really think I didn't also felt that my life was over and wanted to kill myself? Then you are wrong!! I wept uncontrollably, though I was an adult. But now I have gotten over it, and learned from personal experience that life goes on anyway, and that the wheelchair is only a small obstacle that is almost always possible to get around. I don't accept any help with anything cause I'm in a wheelchair. Nothing. Everything I want to do I do myself. You can believe what I say, because I myself have felt the way you feel right now and today I'm not handicapped anymore.

– You mean you can walk again, without a wheelchair?

– No, I'm paralyzed from the waist down and needs the wheelchair, but I'm not handicapped because I can manage anything on my own. You will also do that eventually, you will just need to train intensely for some time, like I had to do.

– That's exactly what the headshrinker always claims. But he knows nothing, he has no problems himself! I don't think he cares a damn about me, really. I once

asked if I could call him at night when I felt bad, but it's impossible. He doesn't care at all about me, really, he was just doing his job, right?

– I'm not going to argue with you. He belongs to **them** who don't get it, right? When I felt bad, I received many stupid advices, but also felt that they just kind of read standard answers from a book. It was my closest that helped and made me feel better. I'm absolutely sure that your mother and father love you and wish you well, actually. And I do that for sure.

– Dad has run of because he could not cope with me and I think my mother blames me for that. I would do that, in any case. It's she who locked me in here so that she wouldn't have to deal with me. I know she hates me!

– Your mother loves you for sure. Mothers always do. My mother had terrible pain every day but refused to die for my sake until the disease finally won over her. Your mother would surely also die for you. The problem is probably just that she doesn't know how she can help you, but listens to those who she thinks knows best.

Lisa continued to talk about all the problems she had had in her life so that Ashley almost felt sorry for her instead. Then she went on to explain how much fun she also had. And the wheelchair only was, as she put it, a "speed bump" that had been given her life to slow down for a while and then it continued as normal. Ashley listened to every word, and understood that she was not the only one that had experienced a hard life.

– So, you have to believe, Ashley, that I will never lie to you, not even to make you feel better. Sitting in a wheelchair is tough, really tough. But the important thing is that it works, you'll be fine. For each week a little better, actually. I firmly believe that you are also going to manage to handle it eventually.

– You may be right in that, Lisa. I actually feel slightly better now after talking with you. It's quite magical to talk to you, you're a superstar and my idol.

– Could be, but I'm of the same flesh and blood as you, so really we are not really that different.

– I'm starting to feel very tired now, so maybe I should try to sleep anyway. But what if I wake up and feel bad again?

– Just call at anytime. You will see that I care really.

– Even at night, like now?

– At any time, I promise. And any number of times. Anything that can make you feel better.

Ashley sighed and fell silent. After a long silence she finally said.

– Thank you, Lisa. I actually believe you. It actually feels better now. I will try to get some sleep now. Sorry that I bothered you so late at night.

– You don't have to make excuses, it's just been nice to make you feel better. Call me back when you feel you need it. Good night, and believe me when I say that you have many happy years ahead of you.

Ashley put down the phone again. For the first time in several months, she had a smile on her lips. Finally someone who actually understood her and who really seemed to care about her for real. And even if she thought she knew Lisa, she was after all a stranger for Lisa. But still, it seemed as Lisa really cares. She fell asleep and slept for once really good rest of the night.

~ ~ ~

The following weeks Ashley phoned to Lisa every night. Lisa began to think it had become quite annoying, but didn't let Ashley feel it, but always sounded happy and encouraging when she called and said she was welcome to call again. Sometimes Lisa also called to her to hear how she felt, to show that she was serious about that she cared. The calls did help, but only temporarily. Finally Lisa decided that she must meet Ashley in person again. So on a Wednesday, Lisa entered her pickup and drove all the way from her farm not far from Ocala up to Princeton and signed in at a hotel overnight.

Early in the morning the next day Lisa rolled up to the receptionist and asked to visit Ashley. She was not admitted because of patient confidentiality so she asked to talk with Jacob instead. Soon, she was sitting in his office explaining that she wanted to meet Ashley.

– Well, you've signed a confidentiality agreement three weeks ago, so why not, Jacob replied. But actually I do need her mother's approval first. But for your sake I'm prepared to make an exception. You have, after all, already met her.

He opened the door to Ashley's room. She was lying with her face to the wall and pretended that she didn't hear the door open.

– Miss Cox, you have a visitor. It's a woman I think you know very well.

Ashley thought it was Judith who came to visit as normal.

– I don't want to meet anyone! Tell that woman to just beat it!

– Are you sure that's what you want, Ashley, Lisa chirped.

She spun around and looked with astonishment at Lisa.

– Is it you, Lisa!? My God, what are you doing here?

– I could say that I just happened to pass Princeton and wanted to take the opportunity to meet you again, but I have not lied to you before, so I will tell it like it is. I'm here for your sake, I wanted to talk to you personally.

– But, but, isn't it very long to drive?

– Well, it was around fifteen hours, but if I can make you feel happy then it's worth it.

Lisa held out her arms towards Ashley but she hesitated a little. She could not just hug a superstar? But Lisa put her arms around her and then she hugged back. Ashley was so moved that she began to cry softly on Lisa's shoulder who just calmly continued to hold her. After a long while, Ashley released the grip and wiped her tears.

– If you only know how much it means to me that you're actually here. You mean everything to me, you are my idol and you care about me so much that you actually drove an entire day to get here.

– The pleasure is mine, actually. Believe me, it feels so good to meet you, and to cheer you up. I have never felt as good as now.

– It's so wonderful that you came here, Lisa. Really.

– You know what? There is a large park outside here, and the sun is shining in spite of that there is snow outside. What do you say if we go out in the park instead? You seem to need some fresh air.

– They will never agree to that.

– Then we don't ask. Come let us sneak out!

Jacob had left the door to Ashley's room open so Lisa rolled out and found a wheelchair that she rolled into the room in front of her. Ashley dragged herself over to the wheelchair while Lisa peeked into the corridor.

– Come on, it's empty. Lets get out of here!

They rolled out in the hallway towards the door out. A caretaker just came in through the department door and politely held it up without thinking about why the door was always locked. Soon, Lisa and Ashley was sitting outside in the park together. It was really cold and Ashley just had a blanket wrapped around her, but she still enjoyed fully the fresh air and to actually be away from the department for a while. Then Ashley remembered a thing that she had wanted to ask Lisa about, but had not dared.

– Well, Lisa. There is one favor I would ask from of you, a pretty big favor actually. In fact, I don't want to ask, but you are the only one that I think can help me. It's quite okay if you say no, I will not be disappointed. Actually, I think you will say no, so you don't feel you have to accept.

– What's the matter with you, Ashley? You usually don't hesitate like this. Just say what you want so I can deside what to answer.

– Alright, then. You've told me you usually write songs and sing them when you are depressed, so I also tried to write a song. It's just that...

She paused and Lisa encouraged her to continue.

– Well, I have a text, but can't manage to write a melody. I don't play any instruments and so...

– Wait here, Lisa said.

She rolled away out to the parking lot and then came back with her guitar. Then they sat together and Ashley sang her text with a monotone melody. Lisa picked it up and improvised a melody that suited the text. Soon they sat and sang Ashley's song together.

– Thank you, Lisa. It was wonderful that you wanted to help me with my song.

– The pleasure was on my side. What do you say we sing some of my songs together? Would you think it could be nice?

– That was the dumbest question I've ever heard.

Lisa smiled and started playing one of her songs. Soon they sat and sang one song after another together. Both of them enjoyed it to the full and Ashley didn't want it to ever end. But finally Ashley was the one that felt that it was just too cold. She sat there shaking from the cold with only a hospital nightgown and a blanket on herself.

– Lisa, I really appreciate to sit out here in the park. It was a fantastic idea this, and absolutely incredible that you just break the rules like this. But I'm starting to actually get very cold now, the wind is horrible and it's below zero. Can't we roll back in again?

– Yeah, I agree. It's quite cold today. But they say it will be warmer and no wind at this coming weekend. Why aren't you calling someone else that can take you out here to the park then? There is a person who understands you better than me, and that you have forsaken. You really should stretch out a hand towards her again, as I think a lot will feel better for you.

– I assume you mean Mom. You know that I hate her, it's her fault that I'm here! I will never talk to her again unless she takes me out of here, and maybe not even then!

– No, I didn't think of your mother. She don't knows you that well, does she? What teenage mother has ever understood her daughter? It must be someone your own age. I'm thinking of Amy, your best friend in the whole world.

– I have not been totally honest with you when I talked about Amy. She *was* my best friend, but I have said such terrible things about her so I think she doesn't want to know me anymore.

– A BFF is always a BFF. She longs for you for sure, and will understand that you were not yourself when you said that. Just call her up. Please, for your own sake! I'm quite sure she will be happy.

Ashley was not so sure but was thinking as they rolled in again. Jacob was furious with Lisa when he had to fetch them at the reception because the door to the department was locked. But Lisa's gentle temperament quickly took the edge off his protests.

– Jacob, my friend. What exactly is this department's business concept?

Jacob's executive manners made him almost automatically explain:

– The purpose of this institution is to receive people who feel bad and make them feel better. And we have a very good percentage of success.

– Well, then look at Ashley! Have you ever seen her smile all over her face like this before? This visit into the park has just done her good, and thus fulfilled the business concept.

Jacob was forced to admit that the trip to the park probably had been good for Ashley. She had never seen him so embarrassed and could not help but giggle a little. It was the most unexpected, but at the same time long-awaited sound Jacob had ever heard from her.

The girls returned to Ashley's room and Ashley went to bed again to warm up. Lisa promised to send over notes to the melody and also record it with several instruments and send over too, so that Ashley could sing her song whenever she wanted.

– Thank you, Lisa. It has really meant the world to me that you actually came here and met me.

– The pleasure was on my side, Ashley. I promise. Don't forget to call Amy! You have promised me that.

– Alright, alright, I promise. But not until tomorrow. Today I'm just too excited to think about her.

~ ~ ~

Amy was in school and ate her lunch in the dining room when her mobile phone rang. She felt that she recognized the number but wasn't really sure.

– Hello, it's Amy.

It was quiet in the phone, she just heard someone breathing.

– Hey I recognize the number. Isn't it you, Ash?

– Well ... Yes it's me, actually. Hi, Amy.

Amy gasped. It really was Ashley! She had not heard a word from her for over four months and had been worried to death, how she was feeling.

– Hey Ash. It's wonderful to hear from you again! I have tried and tried to get hold of you for ages without success. How are you these days?

– It's bad, Amy. Really bad actually. I just don't want you to be mad at me anymore. I can't stand if you're mad at me.

– I'm not angry at you, why would I be? I'm just worried. If you still feel bad, you're certainly not at home, so what hospital are you on anyway? I want to visit you. Today! I will skip the rest of the school today. You are more important than school anyway!

– Well, I don't know if I want to...

– Don't be silly. Don't you think I understand that you are on a psychiatric clinic somewhere. I just don't know where.

– My mom has told you, hasn't she?

– No, your mother are like a clam and refuses to say anything about you more than that you feel bad. But I'm not stupid, you know! If you'd feel bad because of like pain in your back so you would still be able to call me. And then your mom would have told me where you are when I asked her, but she actually says nothing. So, where are you so that I can visit you?

After some hesitation, so did Amy told here where she was, and just an hour later Amy arrived at the front desk asking for her. Because Jacob at Larry's request had listed her in the reception after asking Judith, she was soon shown shown into Ashley's room. She rushed up to her and hugged her long and hard.

– I can't believe you come here in spite of all the bad things I said about you!

– You haven't said anything bad about me, have you?

– That's typical for Mom! She has not said that I hate you because you didn't let me die on the street? Everything bad that happens to me now, I would have been spared if you hadn't stopped the blood from my wound!

– Hey, you are unfair! I couldn't possible know then that you would be paralyzed, and even less that you would become depressed. All I knew then was that you were dying and that I have to save you.

– I know that it's unfair! That's why I thought you were mad at me because I accused you of something that is not your fault.

– Never mind that now. I'm here and I'm not the least bit angry with you. Come Ash, let's go out. There is a wonderful park outside and the sun is shining even though there is snow on the ground. It's wonderfully beautiful. Just throw you a blanket or something!

– Well, I can't go out, Amy. They have their rules.

– Bullshit. Just press that alarm button and ask.

So Ashley pressed the alarm button and soon Larry came in. After a short consultation with Jacob, who called and asked Judith, they decided that the girls could go out if Larry watched her all the time. So soon the two friends was sitting on a park bench in the middle of the park. Larry had helped Ashley move from the wheelchair to the bench and then he sat out of earshot while he was reading a book, but with eyes on them all the time.

– Wow, how can you feel bad about being here? That guy Larry is hooot! You're the luckiest person to get to see him every day.

– You are impossible, Amy. He's probably twice as old as you!

– So what? He's still hot! So why are you so sad? And why will not you go back to school so that we can check out the guys in our own age instead?

– Oh for God's sale, Amy. I'm a cripple sitting in a wheelchair. What's left for me now?

– Just practice a bit then you can surly live in a wheelchair. Many others do!

– Well, I don't want to quarrel with you. But you don't understand what it means to sit in a wheelchair. You can't know it until you do it yourself. Please stop talking about the future, because I have none. The only thing I want is for you to know that you will be my best friend as long as I live. And nothing of what happens to me is your fault.

Amy continued to try to cheer up her friend with little success. She could not argue against the fact that she could not understand what it was like to sit in a wheelchair. It felt like Ashley had already given up, and as if she just wanted to say goodbye to Amy. Finally, she followed Ashley back in again and the she left after promising to stay in touch.

She walked with heavy steps toward the bus, thinking if there was anything she could do. An idea began to grow in her. It was a pretty extreme thing she thought of. But she became more and more convinced that she would go through with it. She talked to her mother in the evening and asked for help. She looked with astonishment at her daughter as if she saw her for the first time.

– Are you sure about this? Will you really make it? My God, what sacrifice you will do for Ashley.

– It's worth it if it only succeeds.

Days passed and Amy called to Ashley every day. But it seemed as if Amy had some secret, for she was unusually quiet so Ashley was worried that Amy could not stand her anymore. But next Sunday Amy came to visit again anyhow. She came into Ashley's room, cheering happily to her.

– Hey, Amy. But my God, what happened with you!? Why are you sitting in that wheelchair? Have you been in an accident or you just want to make fun of me?

– Neither, Ash. You said I don't understand how It's to sit in a wheelchair, and you were right, of course. So I asked Mom for help to talk to her friend in the hospital who lent a wheelchair to me. Since last Monday evening have lived all the time in this wheelchair. I have I wrapped my legs with a scarf so I can't move them. So now you can't say anymore that I don't understand how It's to sit in a wheelchair, because I've done it for the whole week.

– Seriously? You have gone to school like this, though you don't need it?

– Going to school, shopped downtown, travel by bus, going to the bathroom, slept, eaten and everything else. Well, during athletics i school I had to remove the scarf and stand up. So sports can be hard, but everything else works. I don't claim that it was that easy with everything, especially early in the week. But it went better and better. All my friends and Mom filmed me, so I can show it to you.

– You're joking!

– No. Here you have my iPad, I have put in all the movies where you can see. Look here, I try to take me over the threshold of the dining room. It's really difficult, so I've cut together a video of the first time when I can't do it all and then how it goes better every day. Here I sit in the classroom and here I ride the bus to school. Here you are, take my iPad so you can watch everything in peace.

– Do you give away your iPad? You love it and use it all the time!

– Our friendship and your health is worth a hundred times more then that. Come along, let's take a walk again, in both our wheelchairs.

– I don't feel like it today. It would feel quite silly when we were both sitting in wheelchairs.

– No, that's what's awesome! You and I, together in wheelchairs.

Ashley sighed heavily and was silent for a long moment. She felt so frustrated by everything right now.

– What are you thinking of, Ash?

– Well, it's not the same for you. You can always stand up and walk at any second, and the day you get tired of it you just dump the wheelchair. For me, there is no end to it until I find a way to end things for good. It would be best for you if you just forgot about me, so you will not have any more trouble.

The atmosphere immediately became unpleasant. Amy could not think of something else to say or do to comfort her friend. She got tears in her eyes and irritatedly removed the scarves that bound her legs together. Then she said goodbye and walked away pushing her wheelchair. Ashley made no attempt to stop her from leaving, but just laid down again.

Amy didn't come or call on Monday nor on Tuesday. Ashley was getting worried because that she really got angry with her this time. She tried to call her but got no answer. In the middle of the week it even seemed as if the phone had been turned off. She continued trying to call, without success. Still, she hoped to the last that she would come in the weekend, but the whole days of Saturday and Sunday went by without Amy. Now Ashley became even more depressed, she had no one left who cared about her. Well, except for Lisa, but she was not really a friend, but just an artist who has shown some interest in her. It was only a matter of time before Lisa would turn her back on her, too, as it was obvious to Ashley that she could not keep any friends at all.

When the evening came, her mood dropped to the ground and she had decided what she must do. Now there was no turning back, her life would never be better, she could not even keep her best friend.



CHAPTER 5

# Life or Death



Late on that Sunday evening, she asked to be taken to the cafeteria for an evening snack. The weekend staff was just happy that she showed some kind of initiative and helped her out. She bought a bun with milk and a couple of packets of gum. She ate her bun, and then began to chew the gum. After a while she began to drive herself back to the room and the staff just thought it was good that she tried it. She collided with the walls of the corridor all the time, and drove straight into the storeroom door by “mistake”. Finally, she came to her room and pretended to

have trouble with the threshold, while in fact she pressed the gum in the lock of the door so that it closed without locking.

Then, at two o'clock in the night she crawled out into the corridor through the now unlocked door and managed to get into the storage room. Her wheelchair was still put away as she dragged herself along the wall. She removed the chewing gum that she pressed into that lock too and closed the door silently behind her that then locked. Then she began searching through shelves and drawers. It was quite complicated since she didn't reach more than a few feet up, but eventually she found a scalpel, to her great happiness. She had never felt so happy before in her entire life, for now nothing could prevent her from solving her problems once and for all. "No one will find me this time in a locked storage room in the middle of the night", she thought. So she took the knife and put it to his wrist to cut it one final time.

Her heart was pounding and it whizzed in their ears. She became anxious and dragged herself to the door and sharpened her ears. This time nothing was allowed to go wrong, in that case it was better to abort and try another night. She could not hear any noise at all from the corridor but she suddenly heard Lisa's voice slightly. She was confused and wondered if she had gone crazy and was hearing voices, then she realized that it of course was the music from her phone that played in the headphones, with songs with Lisa.

She picked up the phone and turned off the music. Then she sat there with the phone in one hand and the scalpel in the other hand. Her eyes swung between the phone and the knife and she began to hesitate again. She could hear in her head how Lisa swore that the wheelchair and the paralysis was just a bump in the road. Should she call Lisa first? Or should she cut herself and achieve her dream? But all dreams that Lisa talked about then? What all just a lie? And Amy, was she wrong too when she said it was possible to go to school despite of the wheelchair? Her confusion was getting worse when the videos with Amy in a wheelchair was replayed in her head over and over again.

Her thoughts became so intrusive that she almost felt sick. She could not remove the images of Amy that she had watched all week in the iPad. It felt like it

was a hurricane blowing in her brain and she hesitated and no longer knew what she would do. Suddenly she felt that nothing was obvious anymore.

Finally she decided after all to call Lisa to at least thank her and and say good-bye. When Lisa answered her phone, Ashley told her where she was and what she was going to do. Lisa started shaking and got a knot in her stomach when she heard where Ashley was and that she was only seconds away from cutting herself. It whizzed in her ears as she did everything she could to give a little bit of hope back to Ashley after all.

– Please Ashley. You must surely have some desire to live? After all you called me instead of just cutting yourself. It must surely be your subconscious that wants to give life a chance anyway, right?

– Well, I've ruined all the chances I had. You already know that Amy has been here, and she sacrificed so much for me. But I was just mean to her, so now she no longer wants to talk to me. I tried calling all week but she is not picking up. And she has not called me either.

– Well, I'm convinced that there is a natural explanation for that. She might just become sick, or the phone may be broken. I had a friend when I was about your age, and we're still BFFs. You will see that Amy get back to you within a few days. Or why not try to convince your mother that you want to return to school so you can meet her there?

– I don't want to talk to that woman anymore, I told you that!

– But you know as well as I do that she's the only one who can take you out from there. She'll probably just be happy if you starts talking again. Ask her to take you out of that place, she must surely have understood by now that you are not becoming better while you are there.

– Perhaps, but I don't know... I don't know anything anymore...

Ashley began to sob and Lisa continued to talk and talk and talk to her. She explained that life was not over, if only she would try herself. Lisa didn't stop talking and prevented Ashley from thinking of the knife in her hand. Lisa felt somehow that Ashley would cut herself as soon as she stopped talking so the minutes

turned into hours but eventually she anyhow got Ashley to put the knife back and to drag herself back her bed again.

Then she went on to talk about anything and everything just to get her mind distracted until Ashley finally fell asleep from exhaustion around five o'clock in the morning with the phone still in her hand.

~ ~ ~

As usual, Judith came to visit her the next afternoon, but she immediately felt that something was not as it used to be when Michael stopped her in the hallway.

– Unfortunately, your daughter seems to be unusually upset today. She just cries all the time and have not eaten anything all day. We don't know what happened, for she seemed to be quite happy last night and even sat for a while in the cafeteria. But today, she is just crying in her bed. Larry's been in there almost all day but all she says is that she "can't take it" anymore and won't stop crying. I'm sorry, but right now we don't know what we can do for her. I hope you can get through to her today.

– Is Larry still inside?

– Not right now, he has to prioritize another patient that arrived a couple of weeks ago.

Judith sighed deeply and went into Ashley's room. She just laid there with her back against the door as usual and ignored her "hello". Her shoulders was shaking from the sobbing, but it came no sound from her. Judith sat on the chair and tried to figure out something encouraging to say. But Ashley just cried and said nothing. Judith gathered some courage and stroked her arm. Ashley then turned around abruptly, sat up and looked straight at her with tears streaming from her eyes.

– Mom, you have to take me away from here today. Today! I can't take it anymore, Mom. I must get out of here and back to school tomorrow. Believe me Mom, I'm not kidding. Help me! I have never asked for help before, but now I ask!

Judith was chocked. This was the first time that Ashley talked to her since the first day at the centre.

– Are you sure? The doctors say that you are not ready yet. Believe me, I just want your best, and the doctors say that you still need care that I can't give you. I will take you out of here as soon as you are feeling better, believe me!

– You must be kidding, Mom. Feeling better? I feel so terribly bad, Mom. I can't take it anymore and don't know if I can manage to live longer because I can't take it to feel this bad. But I will give you a choice, Mom. You have to choose, Mom, but you must do it today, because tomorrow is too late. There are only two choices, Mom. Life or Death.

– What kind of choices are that!?!

– Listen, Mom! You must listen to me and let me finish talking, because tomorrow is too late. If you don't listen to me now, I will never talk to you again. I will give you a choice here and now today, Mom. It's only today that you can choose. Choose now, Mom! Are you choosing Life or Death? If you leave me here today, you have chosen Death. I will find a way to take my life. Maybe tonight, maybe in a week, maybe later, but it will happen. There are ways, Mom. I will succeed to kill myself! If you leave me here today, you don't have to come back anymore until it's time to get me in a coffin to bury me. Do you want that? Do you really want to leave me here? Are you choosing Death? Is that what you want? But I'm not sure I really want to die anymore, Mom. So if you take me home today, then you choose Life, and I will give Life a chance. I have decided now. I want to give Life a chance now, but then I have to come home. Today! And I have to go back to school. Tomorrow! It's only there that Life exists. Out there. In here there is only Death. You must believe me! How is it gonna be, Mom? Life or Death?

Judith was shocked right into her spine. Never have she heard her daughter talk like this before, and she have never sounded so determined, either. It sounded as if she was telling the truth this time. But it was a terrible truth she told her.

– Do you really think you can manage to go to school? I want to believe you, I really want to believe in you, but it's so hard.

– I can't take this anymore, Mom. I can't take it! It's about my life, and I don't want to feel this bad anymore. Help me, Mom! I want to kill myself. You know that! I don't want to live anymore because I will always need others to help me

with everything. But if I come back home and then back to school I might discover that you and everyone else tells the truth, that I can actually handle myself. That's what I need, not a prison where I just lies brooding all day. You have to let me try, Mom. This is your last chance. What will it be? The choice is yours, I don't care anymore. I just want the pain to end, one way or the other! And if I'm alive or dead doesn't matter anymore to me. It's only you who wants me to live. Well, what do you say?

– But how can I believe you? You have ... not been entirely truthful lately. I will take you out of here, I promise. You just need to feel better first.

– Do you think I'm lying, Mom?

– Of course not, darling ...

– Now you're the one lying, you don't believe me. But I'm not lying now, Mom. Though you're right, Mom. I have lied so much lately. You can't trust me anymore, so don't do it. Believe in yourself instead. Have you seen that I'm getting better by being here? Because if you see that I get a little better each week, then leave me here, because then I will be fine eventually. But am I becoming better, Mom? What do you think? Or do you think I'm getting worse from this place? Don't listen to me, I'm just lying. Listen to yourself instead.

Judith began to waver. Ashley had never talked like this before. She was not lying by saying that she was feeling good, but admitted she felt bad. She also admitted that she was lying. Perhaps this was this truth after all? Judith also herself had begun to doubt about the care she got here. Finally she said, quietly but firmly.

– Ashley, honey. If I do as you want and take you home today, against better judgment, you must first promise one thing. From now on, you have to be completely honest with me and don't hide any important things. No lies anymore and no secrets. Can you promise that? Otherwise, I don't think that I can take you home now.

Ashley looked at her with a shocked facial expression. The disbelief was painted all over her face.

– Hey, I'm a teenager! I need to have secrets for you. There are no teenagers who tell everything to their mother!

– That is my condition. I must know that I can trust you.

Ashley looked irritated and became quiet. She looked at her mother who looked back with a firm gaze.

– Ugh, you're such a pain! However, if that's the condition for you to take me out of here, then I'll promise you that. But then you have to promise me the same thing!

– Of course. From now on, you and I have a truth pact with each other, right?

– Sure, Mom. It will feel strange, but I guess we have a truth pact then.

– Promise me!

– I promise, Mom. Only the truth and no secrets from now.

Judith looked into Ashley's eyes for a long moment and then she asked:

- So, how are you feeling right now? The truth!

- I feel terribly bad right now, Mom. It's the truth! But I'll never be able to feel better in here. Out there is possible.

- Well, pack your things and I'll get your wheelchair.

Ashley quickly picked up her things while Judith fetched her wheelchair. Then she drove her daughter to the expedition without saying anything more. Ashley protested that they were on the way to Jacob's room instead of out, but her mother explained that she'll have to notify them that she released her.

– Hello, I've decided to bring my daughter home today. Is there any paper I have to sign?

The manager Jacob immediately began to protest, and also called in Micheal. Together they both attacked Judith to convince her that she was making a terrible mistake. They tried long and hard to get her to understand that she just was manipulated by her daughter so that she could come home to make it easier to commit suicide. But to Ashley's surprise and utter delight they couldn't move her

mother one inch, so in the end she got a paper that explained that the centre was against her decision and they didn't take any responsibility for it, and she could not be sure that she could come back. She signed it without a second's hesitation.

– This is a big mistake. Your daughter is not even close to being healthy yet.

– I find it remarkable that you have not understood that you should not talk about a person who is present. The big mistake I made was that I placed her here. Forgive me, Ashley, honey. Come now, let's go home.

She grabbed Ashley's wheelchair to roll out her but Ashley stopped her.

– Thank you for listening, Mom. I forgive you and love you but don't touch my wheelchair, Mom. I handle it myself from now on.

Then to everyone's surprise she rolled herself out to the car with some effort and they went home. On the way home Judith began to hesitate about her decision, as she remembered the two previous times when she was fooled to let Ashley go home, and she immediately tried to kill herself.

– Ashley, I need to ask you something now, and don't forget you promised to tell the truth. I want to know if it really is true that you will not try to kill yourself again. I want to trust you, but can I really do that?

Ashley was silent for a long moment before she said:

– It still feels like my life has no meaning anymore. I have not said that I'm not suicidal anymore.

Judith got a shock and slammed on the brakes and the car stopped at the side of the road. Her hands shook and she turned to her daughter with both despair and anger painted in her face.

– But you promised you to told me the truth!

– Mom, I know I've lied so much lately. But I promise that i haven't I lied today. Everything I have said *today* has been the truth. And I have *not* said that I don't want to commit suicide anymore. I have promised to give Life a chance.

– What do you mean by that? I'm not sure I understand it anymore.

– Well, if you had left me in that suicide institute I guarantee that I'd have killed myself. I had found a way. Chances for Life had been zero percent. But now you took me away so I will give Life a chance. Maybe it's just a one percent of a chance, but It's still infinitely more than zero percent. I have promised to give Life another chance, and I stand by it. But I still don't believe that I will find any kind of happiness again, ever. It's you who believe that.

Judith was not particularly reassured by her words, but eventually she after all kept on driving home. Honestly, she didn't have much trust left for the rehabilitation centre's ability to help her daughter. When they got home, she went into the kitchen and demanded to talk seriously with Ashley.

– Ashley, honey, I want you to know one thing. The main reason I took you home today is that I don't believe that they can manage to get you healthy. I have been looking for better places and have found a really nice institution that is light and pleasant and with a fenced park where patients spend much of the time. The only problem is that it's in South Carolina and it's so far away that I would not be able to visit you every day, so I hesitated. But now I have decided that I can't be so selfish. Making you feel better is much more important to me than anything else. So I'm going to drive you there tonight, even if I have to drive all night.

– Mom! You can't be serious!! It well be just the same. Do you really want Dead anyway? I must return to school.

– Honey, I still can't trust in you. Now listen here. The last time you were here in this kitchen, I found you on the floor and you had tried to kill yourself. Admit that one can't feel much worse than that! Then you said that that place have not made you feel even a bit better. That means that you are feeling even worse now than then. So how on earth can I trust that you will not do something stupid again?

– I understand how you think, Mom. In a way you are right, yet wrong. What I said was not that I don't feel better, what I said was that this suicide institution has not made me feel better. But I feel actually a little better today than last time I was here. Not much, but some.

– Now I promise to listen to you. I'm giving you a chance to convince me that you actually feel better. Go ahead!

Ashley looked seriously at her mother and tried to figure out what she would say. Then she took out her phone and Amy's iPad and laid them both on the table in front of Judith.

– Here, let me show you, Mom.

– What iPad is that?

– It's Amy's, she gave it to me. I come to it soon, but let me begin to show this on my phone.

She picked up one of Lisa's songs in her phone so that a picture of her appeared from the album cover.

– This is Lisa, have you seen her on TV or in the newspapers sometimes?

– Sure, I've seen her. Is not she that you are listening to sometimes?

– Listens to sometimes? It's the understatement of the year! She is my Idol. She is my Hero. She is my God. I love her more than anything and everything she does and says is right and proper. She is my everything and it's her I have listened to all the time. Day and night! Her lyrics have always managed to make me be in a better mood. Without her I would never be able to cope in that awful place.

– So you mean you by listening to her songs, then you regain a zest for life? It's actually a little hard to believe.

– Oh no, that's not what I mean. Not even close. Sure, I love her music and her lyrics, and it makes me happier. But it's so much more. Can you believe that she like a miracle appeared and gave a speech in the auditorium? It was mandatory attendance so Larry drove me there. Can you believe my chock when I saw that she is also sitting in a wheelchair?

– She does?!?

– Yes, and didn't have a clue about that. She also explained that she apparently had it really hard herself many times, and even wanted to kill herself. All she said

went straight to my heart. She really understands how I feel. Then she explained to me that I must be strong and that I can take care of myself if I just try. All she said was directly to me, and her words were both sensible and felt completely true.

– What do you mean she was talking directly with you? I thought she gave a speech? It can't have been just you there in the auditorium? That it's difficult for me to believe.

– Of course, the whole room was full of people, patients, carers, Jacob, Michael and several other that I had not seen before. But everyone just kind of disappeared for me and it was just her and me there. It felt like she was talking directly to me, although the room was full of people. Can you imagine what a feeling!

– So her speech got you thinking about life?

– Yes, but it's still only a fraction of the truth. For afterwards she was very quick to catch up with me and stop me when Larry was about to take me back to my room. She sat as close to me as you are now, and explained that she really cared about how I felt. Lisa cares about me even though she had never seen me before! My Idol! My Hero! My God! She looks at me and seems genuinely concerned about me. She even gave me her phone number and said I could call her if I felt bad. Do you get it?!? Totally unbelievable!

– Indeed it is. It just must have felt wonderful for you, to talk directly with her like that since you admire her so much. Well, did you call her anytime?

– I've called her many times. She has explained to me so much about all her difficulties and how she came over them all. Whenever I was sad, it was she who comforted me, personally. She has even phoned back to me almost every day to hear how I feel.

– Incredibly, she is a superstar! I have seen her myself on TV several times. So you say that you have been helped by such a famous artist?

– Exactly. You see, I'm totally convinced in every cell in my brain that I have no future. I will be a helpless package for life and that is why I don't want to live anymore. She states that there are no problems to live in a wheelchair. So either

I'm wrong or she have to be wrong. And she is my Idol and my Hero. She *can't* be wrong, because everything she says is the truth! Most of all, she understands how it is to live in a wheelchair, as she does it herself. But if *she* is right, then *I* have to be wrong, right? So I at least have started to doubt myself. Maybe I'm wrong and it's possible to live in a wheelchair after all.

Judith thought about what she said. "Not much, but in any case it's better then nothing", she thought.

– Not only that, Mom. For like two weeks ago, she came to visit me. Can you imagine, she drove all day just for me. We snuck out into the park, she took her guitar from her car and then we sat there in the park singing together. Can you even imagine how amazing it made me feel? In fact I have never felt so good in my entire life, as I did there in the park with Lisa. Despite my depression and all the worries. Just then and there, I was totally happy.

– You see, you can still be happy anyway.

– Exactly. Then she persuaded me to reach out to Amy again, so I called her the following day. The just took the first bus and came to visit me directly. She even skipped school to see me.

– Yes, I know that. Jacob called and asked if Amy could visit you and I of course allowed it as you apparently had asked for it.

Ashley turned over to show Amy's iPad instead and played a video where Amy rolled around in the school in the borrowed wheelchair.

– My God, what happened to Amy !? Why is she sitting in a wheelchair too?

– She doesn't. Not really. She borrowed a wheelchair and lived with it for a whole week. She did everything in it, she said. Went to school, rode the bus, shopped, walked to the toilet, cooked food sometimes, went to bed and got up out of bed. All by herself. She asked people to record it all on video and gave it to me. Just look!

– Incredible. Amy has really done this?

– Like, Mom. In nearly five months have I've been totally convinced in every cell in my brain that I can't handle myself in a wheelchair, but need help with everything every day. That is why my life is already over, you see. Then Amy does this things. She does everything I'm convinced that I can't do in these videos.

– I see that. It's just that I always tried to say, but I guess you have to see it to really believe it.

– Like, I have always been physically stronger than her, while she has a better reading head. So if she can do this, I can too. Don't you get it? What she has done with these videos is to shake all of me up and everything I believe in. You must understand that this is not a small thing that she has done. I'm so shocked that I don't know what to think anymore. Mom, that's why I said before that it's out there that life is. In school. Downtown. Not being locked up in a psychiatric place. Although I don't believe it fully myself, I must at least try. For Amy's sake. For Lisa's sake. And for your sake. But most of all I must try for Dad's sake, regardless of where he is. I have to give Life a chance anyway.

– So that's why you have changed your mind. You believe in life again?

– No, Mom, I don't. I'm still convinced that in every cell of my body that I have no future. But at the same time a hurricane is blowing in my brain, so I can't tell what is true and what is a lie anymore. That is why I must go back to school and try it for myself. If it turns out that I actually manage all the daily routine, I will survive. But if not...

She sighed and wiped away a tear. Judith was not completely satisfied and looked long and hard at her daughter who for once, looked back at her. She sat there for a long time, trying to decide. Finally she determined anyway that the best thing to do right now, after all, was to allow Ashley to return to school. Hopefully, it would prove to be helpful, especially as Amy was already there.

– Well, then we do what you want, honey. But I'm not happy with this, you should know. Not happy at all.

– Mom, I've not been happy with anything since I got a knife in the back.

Ashley sighed and looked down into the table. Judith nodded slowly.

– I can certainly understand that. None of us are happy right now. But you will see that it will change. Together we will cope with this. As long as we have each other everything else will work out.

– Maybe so. I have at least, promised to try. By the way. Where is Dad, actually? Don't forget our truth pact! You have to say it!

Now it was Judith that had problems controlling her tears. She didn't really know how she could explain what happened. But at the same time, she realized that it was impossible to avoid the question either.

– The truth is that I actually don't know. After your... try in the bathroom then everything changed. Your father became even more introverted and I was so mad at him that I didn't even want to talk to him. We just avoided each other and none of us even tried to change that. He started to sleep on the couch instead of in the bedroom and went to work before I woke up in the morning.

– So what happened then? Did you threw him out?

– No, not at all. One morning he was just gone and just left a note on the kitchen table with his wallet, phone and everything else. The only thing he seems to have brought with him were the clothes on his body and the old car.

– What did the note explain, then?

– Nothing special, I'll show you.

Judith walked over to the kitchen counter and search a bit in a pile of papers on the bench. Then she put a piece of paper on the table in front of Ashley.

Honey!

When you read this, I'm already gone. I understand that you no longer love me and that everything I do just worsens the situation for you and Ashley. I can't stand this any longer as I'm just a burden, especially for Ashley. So it's much better if I didn't exist.

I wish with all my heart that you both can get back to the joy of life and I wish you all the best.

Farewell forever.

Your's Joel

– But, Mom! Oh my God !! This feels like a suicide note! Does he really ...

Ashley sobbed.

– I know how that sounds, but I know nothing more. On one hand, he moved all the money in his bank accounts to mine and didn't bring anything except the old car, not even his wallet. At the same time, I should have found out if he... you know... were dead, but nothing. But why neither he nor the car has been found is also a mystery. So, darling, I honestly don't know what happened to him. I'm just so disappointed in him right now, regardless of what happened.

Ashley sighed deeply and nodded, but the tears still flowed down her cheeks.

– Honey, don't be sad. Maybe he's out there somewhere and will come back, who knows?

– Hopefully.

– But what I want to know is what will happen now this evening and night? Do I have to sit outside your door all night guarding you?

– This evening I will gather what I need in school tomorrow. Then I really hope that I will get something to eat, because I'm actually hungry. I have not eaten all day. Then I'll take shower before I go to bed. Probably I can't sleep, but I promise you a hundred percent that I will go up as usual tomorrow, eat breakfast and then go to school. No matter how hard it gets, because I have to do this.

Judith hugged Ashley and promised that she would support her and Ashley rolled into her room.

– No closed doors yet, her mother yelled after her.

– Yeah, yeah, she replied.

She found her backpack that she carried that fatal day. It was in a plastic bag and it didn't seem as if her parents had even looked in the bag. She picked it up and made a face when she inspected it. The backpack was drenched in blood, and when she took out the math book that she had in the bag most of the sides was totally wrinkled and brownish red. Ugh! She saw a rip in her backpack and a hole from the blade. The rest of the things in the backpack as pencil cases and plastic folders with papers had made it better, so she washed them in the bathroom, still with the door open. She felt ill when she took the backpack to her mother who was in the kitchen preparing food.

– Mom, I probably need a new school bag.

She dropped the backpack on the bench in front of her mother who looked at it with discomfort. All the terrible memories came back.

– It would probably be better with a shoulder bag and not a backpack, Ashley explained. A backpack would be difficult in a wheelchair.

Judith grabbed the backpack with two fingers and dropped it in the trash and said that Ashley could get one of her own bags. Ashley took one of her mother's shoulder bags and rolled back to her room to pack it.

At Princeton House Behavioral Health, Larry went into Ashley's room to check on her before he went home. To his surprise, the bed was empty and made up and there was no trace left after her. He went to Jacob and asked about it and got to know, to his dismay, that her mother had brought Ashley home against all the recommendations. Larry got a bad feeling and was really worried when he went home.

At the same time Ashley sat and ate with her mother. Judith looked anxiously at her daughter, concerned about her sad face. After the meal, Ashley took a shower sitting on the floor and then went to bed. All rolling and fixing had made her exhausted. Oh my God what her condition had collapsed during these five months!

She had trouble falling asleep, but lay awake brooding. Judith could not sleep either out of concern for Ashley, as she sneaked several time to looked at Ashley, who is not allowed to close the door to her room. From the door it seemed that Ashley was asleep, but the third time she looked then Ashley surprised her.

– Mom, I'm still alive. You can take it easy. Wait by the way, we do it like this.

To Judith's surprise, Ashley dragged herself over to the wheelchair, rolled into the master bedroom and lay down in Joel's bed instead.

– So mom. Lay down here now. None of us can sleep anyhow, but in this way you only need to open your eyes to check me out.

Judith smiled a crooked smile and lay down in her bed. They were both silent for a while until Ashley asked:

– Mom. When I was little, I was ever afraid to go to school? Such as the first time?

– No, sweetheart. The first time you were so anxious and tense, but not the least bit afraid. You've never been afraid of school, not what I have seen in any case.

– Until now, she said quietly.

– What do you mean?

– I'm terrified of what will happen in school tomorrow. That's one reason why I can't sleep.

– It will certainly go well, you'll see. You have always been strong and fearless. Like that time a boy teased you and you hit him so hard that his mother came here and complained to me.

Ashley smiled inwardly at the memory. But would she actually be strong in the school? Right now she didn't feel even a bit strong, just scared and worried.



CHAPTER 6

# Gives Life a chance



The lesson had already begun when there was a knock on the door. The teacher opened and looked at the one that had knocked with surprise. Ashley worked her way over the threshold. The entire class gasped and fell into silence when they saw her and how pale and skinny she looked in her wheelchair. Ashley was embarrassed by the attention.

– Excuse me so much that I'm late, Miss Grayson. First I missed the bus then everything messed up for me.

She rolled down the room but got stuck between the benches and had to reverse and fuss to get to her place. The chair there was in the way and when she tried to move it away she got help from one of the guys. Finally she sat on her place while everyone stared at her, to her embarrassment. The teacher, whose name was Eugenie Grayson and was Ashley's class teacher, said just as if nothing special had just happened:

– You can open your mathematics book on page 125, so we can continue.

– Excuse me, but is it possible to get a new math book? I know we should be careful with the books, but this is like not really my fault.

She picked up the brown-red book and showed it.

– What on earth has happened to it?

– It's just a little blood. Or quite a lot, actually. My own blood.

The teacher took her own book, went down and gave it to Ashley and took her book. She put it in a box with a shudder.

When the break came, she felt almost haunted down the corridors. When she quickly turned her head, she saw how the school curator hid behind some boxes. Ashley drove full speed ahead down the hallway and around a corner. After a few seconds curator came half running around the corner and nearly collided with Ashley who had stopped and turned around.

– Why are you following me all the time, she said accusingly.

The curator turned red in her face and stammered.

– Well, I'm sorry but ... The principal was told you returned and asked me to keep an eye on you so you don't... well...

– Commit suicide, you mean?

– Well, yes. Given what I heard then...

– You can stop chasing me now. I promise to notify the principal in advance next time I kill myself. Come on, scramble off. Now! Leave me alone!

The curator drooped away and told the principal that she had been caught. He sighed and went to the school psychologist instead.

The school day went on but Ashley was feeling worse and worse. It turned out that Amy was actually sick, so she still didn't know if she still was angry. No one else seemed to want to talk naturally to her, and they handled her as a disabled person all the time instead of as before. In the afternoon break, she could not cope with it all but rolled into the rest room and cried uncontrollably. She leaned over the sink and sobbed in despair in the belief that she was alone on the toilet. An older girl who she knew was called Sophia came out of a booth and came up to her.

– Are you all right, or what?

– Does it look like I'm all right? Ashley sobbed.

– No, you look terrible. Can I help you with something? You seems to be very sad.

– Don't you get it! That is precisely what makes me sad. Everyone is trying to help me, but it just makes me feel worse.

– Well, I don't understand what you want me to do. The last thing I want is to make you sad, but I just don't know what I should do to help you feel better.

Ashley flinched. Suddenly she realized that Sophie had hit the nail straight on the head.

– You've already helped me. Thank you very much, but now I have to work out the rest for yourself.

Sophie looked confused when Ashley rolled away. Actually she just wanted to look for a knife and cut herself again, but she had promised her mother to give Life a chance. Moreover, she began to feel more angry than sad now. So she rolled down to the classroom where she would have the last lesson of the day and asked the teacher if she could say something to the class before the lesson. So when the

whole class was gathered, the teacher clapped her hands to get everyones attention.

– Sit down in your seats and be silent now. Ashley wants to say something before we start the lesson. Go ahead, Ashley!

– Thanks.

She turned to the class that had become totally quiet looking at her.

– Hello. I'm Ashley for those who don't remember it. I have been sick in various ways for several months but is back now. There seems to be spreading all sorts of rumors about me here, so I would like to kill them and to tell the truth. Yes, it's true that I was on a nuthouse most of the time I have been away. It's also true that I'm very much suicidal and that I several times have tried to kill myself. I'm seriously not sure how long I will have the strength to live.

She paused to blow her nose. It was completely quiet in class and many was really beginning to feel very uneasy.

– Today I have been treated in so many different ways. Some of you are avoiding me completely and go detours around me to avoid talking to me. Others tittle-tattle and whispers behind my back and change the subject when I come close. Cheryl, you wanted to say that your hamster became sick and died, but you didn't dare not say the words "sick" and "death" in front of me so you changed the subject. Then there are others of you who talk with me and explain how you fell pity of me. You ask what I need and if I want to "speak out" then it's just to come. Finally, it's also some that will help me to push my wheelchair, or are running your legs off to open doors for me or lift my wheelchair over thresholds. Johnny, I saw you nearly killed yourself when you stumbled upon some benches to come before me to the door to open it for me.

She had the total attention of the class when she dropped the bomb.

– What you don't understand is that all of this, ant I mean everything that I just said, are pushing me one step closer to suicide. So I ask all of you, stop doing what you're doing if you don't want my death on your conscience. Please!

Ashly could no longer keep the tears back, but buried her face in a handkerchief again. The whole class was shocked as well as the teacher. They had never seen Ashley cry before. She used to be so tough! A few even began to sob themselves of despair. John stood up and asked what everyone wondered.

– Ashley, it's not one single of us who wish you bad. I guess we all feel uncertain about how we should behave. Can you explain how we shall deal with you instead of what we are doing?

Ashley made an effort to collect himself.

– The key word is *normalization*. Ignore my wheelchair and ignore my troubles. Treat me the same as you did before. Never try to help me, and don't offer any help until I actually ask for it. I have to learn to take care of myself in order to feel better, and the only way is to practice. Currently it really sucks, but I guess I will learn. Everything has become harder and worse since I ended up in this damn wheelchair. But anything that I'll find is the same as it was before, makes me feel a little bit better. In this chair sits the same Ashley as the one that previously walked on two legs, just some tough experiences richer. Okay?

She rolled down to her place to a murmur from the class. The teacher clapped her hands again and said that if anything happened to Ashley's delight:

– Let's all open our history books on page 92 to get started.

~ ~ ~

– Well, how was school today? Feel better now?

Judith was eager to hear some good news about her daughter but was disappointed again.

– Can't even talk. My whole body hurts. If you want to talk, come my room, because I will rest on my bed.

Judith followed her and sat down beside the bed. Then she repeated her question.

– It went really, really bad. I feel worse than before. Everyone seemed to avoid me and nobody treated me like before.

– Do you want me to call the curator so she can take it up with the class?

– NO! Don't involve her now!! She was chasing me half the day today, until I became angry and told her.

– Okay, well, you see, that's probably my fault. I phoned to the principal this morning and asked them to keep an eye on you. But I didn't mean that they would chase after you. But what do you want me to do then?

– Nothing, Mom. Absolutely nothing. Before the last lesson I got permission to talk to the whole class, and I explained everything. Relax, Mom, I have not given up just yet. Tomorrow is another day, it might be better. Or maybe worse, what can I know?

Judith was if possible even more worried.

– But was it nothing that was good in school then. Nothing at all?

– No, Mom. Nothing was good. Everything was just awful.

– But you have nevertheless managed to get there by yourself and then home again? It that not something you said yesterday was impossible?

– Lay off. I didn't even manage to catch the bus! Just before the bus stop it's a crosswalk with traffic light. When it turned green the the bus came so I hurried over. But I couldn't even get up on the sidewalk! After a while, it became red and all the cars started honking at me. When I finally drove around the corner and onto the sidewalk, the bus had already left. Then the next bus was full and the place for wheelchairs was occupied, so the driver had to come back and throw the guy that sat there off the bus, and he became pissed. Not to speak of the hill up from the bus stop at the school entrance. I was dripping with sweat when I finally got into the school. Horrible! Just sick!

– But still. You got there, didn't you? Despite the fact that you didn't think it would be possible?

– Well, yes, perhaps. Well, I actually did it, despite all the problems, so it kind of worked in the end.

– Now think really hard. It's still nothing you can remember that was good?

– No, nothing! Or, well, maybe. When I sat in the class I wasn't thinking anymore that I was paralyzed. It felt pretty good.

– There you are, everything was not bad. Anything else you can think of?

– Well, maybe it was not so difficult to ride the bus as I thought it would be. Like, I was sitting on the bus, even though it was full. Before I had to stand up all the way to school.

– Have you thought that you was able to sit thanks to the wheelchair, not in spite of it? Without the wheelchair, you had to stand up.

– Uhm, Ashley replied thoughtfully.

Judith left her to her own thoughts, which spun around and around in her head. Judith started cooking instead. When she was finished, and was about to set the table with two plates, the doorbell rang. Judith opened the door and found to her surprise, that it was Larry who who was standing outside.

– Uhmm, Mrs. Cox. I apologize for that I'm just coming here unannounced. It's just that when I heard yesterday that you discharged your daughter, I was so worried about her that I could hardly sleep. Right now I'm even more worried over the possibility that I'm stepping into a tragic situation here, and I'm almost afraid to ask how things are with Ashley.

– Yes, is really not especially good with her, but you'll have to ask herself. ASHLEY! Can you come to the door? There is someone who wants to meet you.

– I'm tired, let me just rest.

– There is time to eat anyhow. Come here now, I do think you want to meet him.

Larry was surprised by the tough attitude Judith showed. He didn't understand that it was what Ashley felt the best from, to be treated as before. Ashley groaned but after a short while she came rolling.

– Gosh, Larry, are you visiting? That was really unexpected!

– Ashley, you know that I care about you for real. I feel very concerned about you right now. How are you actually? Yesterday you were the totally heartbroken!

– You are wonderful, Larry. Do you see Mom, he does care for real! Not like the others on that suicide institute. What do you say, can't he stay for supper?

– Of course he can. Assuming you don't have other plans, Larry?

– In fact I don't, but I don't want to make any trouble...

– It's no trouble at all. My God, a little food's is not much considering what you have done for my daughter. Come in, by all means!

Judith put one more plate on the table and soon they all three sat around the dining table. Larry glanced a little uneasily at Ashley.

– Don't worry; Larry, I'll probably make it one way or another. Right now it feels like shit, but at the same time, I'm super happy to be home. Today I went to school, and tomorrow I go back there, as I have promised to give Life a chance.

– It sounds too good to be true. Are you really happy now?

– No, not at all. But I have learned that I'm actually can handle myself after all. But Mom thinks I'll just wake up one day and feels good, but it will never happen. No, wait now and listen to me, Mom. You must understand that it's a process. If I wake up every day and feel a little better than the day before then you should be satisfied. It will take weeks, months, maybe even years, but if you'll have it your way, then I'll eventually will discover that I have a future anyhow.

– So then everything is fine, as long as you get a little happier every day?

– Well, I still think I'm going to kill myself, but now listen Mom, for this is something you like to hear. I've been laying down thinking while you where cooking. Before, I was convinced that I would forever be dependent on others and therefore my life had no meaning anymore. But now I do think that it might work anyway, but is still convinced that a day will come when life no longer gets better. Then the question will be whether it's good enough or not. I still think it will not be enough, but I know one thing. If I kill myself, it's not today, tomorrow or even the next few weeks.

– Can I count on that, honey?

– Well, I figured out what actually is my problem. Although I actually made it to and back from school today, then I still have three huge problem that must be solved before I think can I have a future.

– What are the three problems then? Larry asked.

– The first is that I'm hurting like hell in my arms from just getting ahead.

– Isn't it just because you are weak in your arms? Maybe if you should start with weight training, then it will be probably better.

– That's right, weight training. Like rolling a wheelchair, that's quite demanding. The second problem is that I was exhausted when I arrived at school. My fitness is has hit the bottom because I laid down on my damn back for almost half a year. How do fitness train, Larry? You seem to be in good shape.

– I usually run in the park a few times a week.

– Well, I can hardly run, so I have to roll instead. My third problem is that I get stuck on thresholds, curbs and such. Can you figure out how to solve it, too?

– You'll have to practice your technique, I guess.

– By rolling chair. So then are my three biggest problems are self solved. I just need to roll my chair and let it take the time that's needed.

– Do you really mean it, darling? It sounds almost too good to be true.

– Like, Mom, I'm paralyzed, but not stupid. I know that one can't build muscle and fitness in a few days. It will take months to train my body again. So I can't know if my life has meaning until I made that. So, Mom, from now on you can sleep at night. Your job will be to push lots of proteins down my throat, so I can build muscle. I'm not ready to give up just yet, I want both of you to know.

– You must not give up, Ashley, Larry said. There are many who will be disappointed if you give up, Ashley. Not just me and your mother, but your friend Amy too.

– I guess so. Probably even Lisa would be disappointed. By the way, what a miracle that it was she that showed up to do that speech!

– Well, you know what, Ashley? It was actually my idea that Lisa should make her speech there. And it was mostly because I know that Lisa is your idol. I saw an interview with Lisa on TV and heard that she was thinking of giving speeches to others in wheelchairs. So I kind of planted the idea into Jacob.

– Then I understand why Lisa showed up there and gave that speech. Your sly dog! Isn't he wonderful, Mom? Ashley laughed.

Judith smiled for the first time in several months. How wonderful it was to hear her laugh again! This was almost too good to hope for!

– I wish you every success, Larry said when he was about to go. Just don't say anything to Jacob that I was here, for he has said that I'm not allowed to have any contact with you. But I don't care about it. I hope you won't forget me, but keep in touch. You still have my phone number, I hope.

– Larry, I will never forget you, you can rely on that!

Ashley gave him a hug and felt almost happy. There were several who cared for her anyhow. Maybe even Amy had forgiven her!

~ ~ ~

The next day Ashley was on time to school. She had learned how much longer things took when she was in a wheelchair. When she rolled towards her classroom she heard a guy from the senior year talk  out loud as she passed him:

– Check out that invalid!

Then he laughed together with his friends. John that was on his way into the classroom froze and turned around. Ashley also stopped, but then turned and rolled up to the one that has talked.

– Who is it you are calling an invalid?!?

He stood up in front of her and said rudely.

– I see only one invalid here and it's you!

Ashley rolled closer and then spun around with the wheelchair so that it hit his leg with a nasty crunching sound. He fell down on the floor in front of her and screamed in pain. One of his buddies clenched his fists and took a step closer to her.

– Sure, come on, beat me if you want! It will be a pleasure to hear you defend yourself with the principal later why you hit a girl in a wheelchair.

He immediately opened his hands again and took a few steps backwards with a dismissive gesture. His buddy on the floor, was holding his ankle.

– Hell, I think you have broken my leg, you lunatic!

– That's good, then we are two invalids here now!

His friends found it hard to keep from laughing and John laughed out loud in the classroom door. This was the Ashley he remembered, admittedly small, but one that didn't take any shit from anyone. Ashley was pretty happy after lunch because it felt like most things had improved. No teacher commented that she was in a wheelchair and during breaks, she sat and just talked with her friends. She had not seen Amy yet, because she was still sick. The others had stopped trying to help her and also stopped avoiding her even though many still was staring after her. The thug who teased her before had even limped up to her at the lunch break and apologized.

Shortly after two o'clock, she was sitting as usual in a lesson when the teacher got a message on the screen.

– Ashley, I got a message from the principal that you apparently have missed some appointment at two o'clock. It's okay, you can go there now.

– I have not missed the appointment, I have chosen to ignore it.

The teacher nodded and keyed in a response. Almost immediately the reply came. She asked Ashley to accompany her out to the corridor.

– Well, Ashley. The principal wrote that I would say to you that you must go to this meeting with the school psychologist, otherwise you risk being expelled from school.

– What!?! He forces me to go there? Can he really do that?

– Personally I don't think it's right to force you, but that's what the principal seems to have decided. It's probably best if go there anyway. It might be good for you after all, who knows?

Ashley rolled into the school psychologist reception with an angry face slamming the door behind her.

– So what is it you want then?

– Good afternoon, Miss Cox. Glad you had the opportunity to come here. The principal asked me to call you here because you allegedly don't feel so good, and we want to try to change that.

– He ignores me for sure! The only thing he cares about is his school and its sponsors, and it would look bad if I committed suicide here at school.

– That's not the reason. He cares for you, like I'm doing. We don't want you to feel bad. Don't you think it would make you feel better if you talked about your problems a little? You probably know that I have total confidentiality.

– Sure you care. *Not*. If you cared, you would not force me to come.

– I have not forced you. I'm here for you if you want, but you are not oblige to be here, it's voluntarily. You don't even have to make an appointment, just knock on the door. I'm really concerned about you and care about you very much.

– You're just like the the shrinks. Everyone "cares" only during working hours and after that don't give a damn. I've had enough of it, so goodbye!

Ashley snorted and rolled out. She saw the principal watching her through a small gap in the door to his door. She rolled there and shouted:

– What the hell are you doing, really?!

The principal jumped and came out into the corridor with angry steps.

– What on earth did you just say to me?

– Like, just after lunch today, I felt better than I ever have done since the day I got a knife stabbed in my back. But now it feels like I got stabbed in my back again

and right now I just feel like just get out of here and to the hell with everything! I want you be clear about that if my mother calls tomorrow and tells you that I've killed myself this night, it's your fault!

She spun around with the wheelchair and took off with full speed down the hall, but ran straight into some benches because she was blinded by tears again. She swore and reversed as she tried to wipe her eyes.

– Ashley, please. Can't you come back here and talk to me a few minutes?

She looked at him over her shoulder.

– I will not listen for a second what you have to say unless you go down on you knees and apologize to me!

She began rolling around the benches when the principal collected himself and caught up with her. He knelt before her and said.

– Ashley, I apologize. I'm sincerely sorry if I said or did something wrong against you. The only thing I want is for you to feel good like any other here at school. Please Ashley, come back and talk to me. I beg you!

She stopped in amazement, and sat still for a few seconds. She looked around and noticed that several students stopped and stood staring at her, and the principal who was kneeling in front of her. Then she turned and rolled back and into his office without a word.

– Thank you, Ashley. I appreciate that you came back. It's obvious that I behaved badly towards you. The problem is that I don't really understand what I have done. Can't you help me to help yourself by explaining how I should have done instead?

Ashley calmed down a bit and realized that perhaps it was not so good that she was always so angry and easily irritated.

– I just want to be treated like I used to, before I was in a wheelchair. If I want help, whether in therapy or over thresholds, I will ask for it. And I promise you, sweetie, next time I cut myself, I'll do it elsewhere.

– Ideally, you should cut yourself at all. Thank you for telling me. I promise that this was the last time I will treat you differently because you use a wheelchair.

Ashley returned to the classroom and felt, after all, a little pleased to have shouted at and lectured the principal without being punished for it. She had even made him kneel down in front of other students! When she eventually came home she surprised her mother by actually seem quite happy again. She told her about the incident with the principal and laughed happily. Judith was not so fond of that she been disrespectful to the principal, but was so grateful that her daughter seemed to be in much better mood now so she let it be.

~ ~ ~

But the nights were still hard when the nightmares came and she could not sleep without brooding over her troubles. So that night, she called Lisa, anyway. Lisa was still as friendly and understanding, but was grateful that it has become much less frequent that she called. This night she of course also was told about some good things that happened. Judith also had great difficulty sleeping at nights from the worries for her daughter. She heard some sound from Ashley's room and became worried. Did she do something stupid now? She sneaked down the hallway to the room and listened outside the still open door. Who was she talking to? At two o'clock at night? She walked into the room. Ashley tried to hide the phone and looked guilty.

– Who are you talking to this late at night?

– It's just Lisa. I couldn't sleep and didn't want to wake you up. You also becomes so sad if I try to talk about my problems. Lisa always listen to me.

– Now you have to say goodbye for the night so she can sleep. We can talk about this tomorrow. Good night!

Ashley ended the call and then put down the phone. The next morning Judith asked her how often she used to call Lisa and reminded her of their truth pact, to no longer lie to each other.

– Like, it's not that often. Last night i think was just the second time since I came home.

– And while you were in rehab centre then?

– Like, it's only when I feel bad that I'm calling, and I always felt bad at that suicide institute, mostly at night. But I didn't count how often I called.

– But it was a couple of times a week? Every night? Several times a night?

Ashley shook her head as until the final proposal.

– Did you call several times each night to this Lisa? Seriously? Are you crazy, she must be furious at you!?!

– But I felt so bad, I could not take it by myself. Like, the shrinks don't really care about me, and you just started crying when I tried to talk to you when I felt bad before. And Dad just left, he couldn't cope with me at all! It's just Lisa that listen to me, and she has never complained, far from it.

– But how long do you talk to her?

– Like, it's just a short while normally. A few minutes maybe.

– And the longest?

– At most, I don't remember... Maybe a couple of hours one night... or three maybe...

– Three hours!?! My God, she must have been completely destroyed! How could you do such a thing to her, you don't actually know her?

– But I felt so terribly bad that night. You don't want to know what happened then. Believe me, don't ask!

– You have to tell me, it doesn't matter what it is. I need to know.

– But you will not like it. Don't force me, you will regret it!

– It's the same, tell me now.

– Yeah, yeah, yeah, suit yourself.

Then Ashley told how she nearly killed herself that last night at the rehab centre. Judith put her hands in her face and felt completely paralyzed with shock. It felt as if something ice cold was clutching her heart.

– Oh my God, how terrible! I thought you were safe there!

– I told you when you arrived later that day that I would kill myself if you forced me to stay there. I'd probably done it that same night. But you listened for the first time and did the right thing. And now I feel at least a little bit better. Sometimes I actually think I want to live. It's just often at the night when the dark thoughts don't want to leave me alone. Lisa understands that, and listens, and makes me think bright thoughts again.

– But you're taking sleeping pills every night. How is it that you don't sleep at night?

– Like, those pills. they make me feel bad, like I'm flying, and as if I'm not me. So I don't take them, actually. I didn't take them at the suicide institute either. But now I have to leave, otherwise I'll miss the bus.

Judith let her go to school, but then sat down in the kitchen, unable to go to work. Her hands would not stop shaking. It was so close that Ashley had succeeded in committing suicide! And she didn't take any medicine either! But this poor Lisa, as she was suffering from all of this! Finally, she called to Lisa herself, whose phone number she had gotten from Ashley. She felt that she must apologize.

– Hello, Lisa. I'm Judith, but you probably don't know me otherwise then as Ashley's mother.

– Hello. Yes, I know who you are, and that you finally made the right decision. Yes, Ashley has said that she is home now and is back in school.

– Well, I must apologize for what she has done and still does to you. I mean that she is calling you too often and even at night. I don't understand how you have been able to sleep at all, and do your job. I'm so sorry for it all, and will try to persuade her to stop calling.

– Please don't do that, let her call me. Although I have to admit that it's hard to talk to her when she is so depressed, but when we hang up the phones she always feels better, and it's so rewarding for me to know that I can actually make a difference for someone else.

– Well, not all night anyway. You've got to work, too.

– You may not know that I'm a musician. I often sit at night and write songs, and my husband works as a night guard, so I'm often awake anyway. It's quite okay that she calls me, believe me. And since she came home it has never been more than no more than once a night, and never during the day.

– I'm really grateful to you for listening to my daughter, and thus helping her so much. Though I don't really believe that it's not a problem for you. But I'm also quite angry at you at the same time.

– Angry? Why?

– Ashley told me that the night before I discharged her, and that she was about to cut herself and called you. What I don't get is why you didn't immediately call to me or to the rehab centre so that they could stop her. Instead, you tried to talk her out of it. But it would just have taken a second, then it would have been too late. Why did you gamble with her life like that?

– I know that if I could have called so that someone came and stopped her. But then she'd had totally lost her trust in me. So the next time she got the chance, she had not called me, but gone through with the suicide. But I already had the number of the centre, and had another phone ready beside me. If she would had made it, then I would had called directly and they had managed to stop the bleeding. My God, I'm not totally irresponsible, you know!

– Oh, I didn't know. Excuse me then. And millions of thanks for what you have done, I'm actually starting to slowly see an end to her depression and the beginning of a happy life in the future. All thanks to you in the first place.

– That's exactly why I do it. I want to help her the same way I was helped when I didn't want to live anymore. Let her call if she needs, I can easily stand it.

– Thank you, I will. Many thanks again for your incredible help!

~ ~ ~

Amy was about to get ready to go to school. The night before, she had got her phone back from her mother that had taken it away from her before. It was com-

pletely discharged so she had it charging all night. When she turned the phone on, she saw all the missed calls from Ashley. She became really scared, especially as there were no missed calls since Sunday night. It felt as if something ice cold was clutching her heart.

– What have you done, Mum! she screamed for her mother.

– What do you mean, and what's with that tone?

– Look here! There are over 40 missed calls from Ashley during the week. Why didn't you let me talk to her?

– You know very well that you were too sick to use the phone. That's why I took it away from you last Monday.

– But, you could answer it yourself, and tell her that I'm sick! I mean, it's forty missed calls! If that's not a cry for help then I don't know what is. I swear, Mom, that if Ashley had killed herself because of this, I will never forgive you. Never!

– Calm down, it's certainly good with her. She has continued to call, right?

– Not since Sunday. Maybe she gave up on me then. Or gave up on life.

Amy could not hold her tears back. Erin also began to get worried now.

– I'm really sorry, honey. You are right that I should have answered. But you should not believe the worst because of it. Just call her and check!

Amy looked at her phone and realized that she really was in a hurry to go to school. She ran all the way to the bus. The bus was so crowded that it was not possible to call Ashley.

When she finally ran into the school she tried to simultaneously juggle with her phone to make the call. But then her heart jumped over a few strokes when she saw Ashley rolling from the bus and she put away her phone and ran towards her to greet her instead.

– Ash! Oh my God you're back? What nice to finally get the company of a sane person. How are you really?

– It's still pretty bad, but it feels as if It's on the right track after all. Like on the way back to life again. This hill from the bus stop to school felt a bit easier today than the day before yesterday. I was totally exhausted then!

– Shall I push you?

– Don't touch my wheelchair, she replied automatically.

Amy started to walk beside her instead.

– Finally we can go and check out the guys again as before! You'll hang out with me after school? It will be just like before.

Ashley immediately felt a little better. Amy didn't care at all about what happened to her or that she was in a wheelchair! It was as if the wheelchair didn't exist. She was really good at making Ashley feel better.

– Sure, as long as you don't want to go the same way as the last. I don't think I can go that way, at least not yet. Though when I think about it, I must go straight home. It will probably take quite a long time before Mom starts to trust me again.

– Well that sucks actually, but who can blame her?

– Like, Amy. You and I must have a serious talk. But we don't have time now, the class will start soon. We must have a long talk in the break.

Amy was a bit confused and almost worried what Ashley wanted to talk about. She was sitting on needles the whole first lesson. When the break finally came then the two friends looked for an empty space in the corridor. Ashley looked deep into the eyes of her friend and started.

– First I want to ask you very much for forgiveness. When you visited me in a wheelchair last Sunday, I was so mean with you and made you sad. And that despite the fact that you have done something so incredible sacrificial, and also even given me your iPad with those videos.

– You don't need to apologize, I understood that you were just depressed.

– Like, then when you didn't answer my calls the whole week then I thought you gave up and was so angry that you didn't want to be with me anymore, and who could criticize you for that?

– Well, it was Mom. She took my phone away from me because I continued to play with it although I was sick. Then it shut off when the battery died. I was actually really scared this morning when I saw all the missed calls. Most scared because you didn't call me since Monday. Actually, I thought that you, you know, given up and...

Amy paused and sobbed and were unable to finish the sentence.

– You mean you thought I had killed myself. You are incredible, for it's actually true. On Sunday night, I tried to kill myself again. I managed to crawl into a storage room in the middle of the night and found a knife. Look here! This is the wound that I caused myself then.

Amy began to feel ill and looked at the wound. It was not large, just an inch and not very deep.

– Skit, Ash! But what happened then? You seems not to be dead yet anyway!

– Well, except that I called and spoke with Lisa, I began to think of the videos when you roll around the school in that wheelchair. So I began to see myself in that wheelchair. We're quite alike, though. Suddenly it came over me that if you can do it, the I can do it too, and it was then that I began to long to be back at school. So the next day I managed to persuade my mother, like a miracle, and the day before yesterday I came back here again.

– It was nice that I could inspire you.

– Inspire? You're kidding, right!?! You saved my life! And I don't mean metaphorically but for real. Without you and your wheelchair trick, I would have been dead on Monday and you had received an invitation to my funeral. You're my guardian angel, Amy. My guardian angel! Not just once, but twice. I will always be grateful for that.

Amy was so moved that she got tears in her eyes. She hugged Ashley long and hard before they finally went into the next lesson together. At this moment Ashley was happier than in many months.

~ ~ ~

When Ashley came home, her mother was standing in the door with her jacket on.

– Just put your school bag inside and come. I have booked an appointment for you to a doctor and we don't have much time to get there.

– What do you mean doctor? I'm not sick!

– It's a psychiatrist named Raymond Richardson. Hey, don't look angry because it doesn't help. We will discuss your medications and you will listen to what he says and be active in the discussion.

– But, Mom...

– No "but Mom", you just do as I say! You don't want to be cosset because you are sitting in a wheelchair, you said. If you don't do as I say, you'll get grounded for a week!

Ashley got angry but still had to come. She felt so angry at her mother, who always wanted to decide over her. She sat in the car, bubbling with anger. Then suddenly she realized that her mother just did what she had done in the past, before the assault. She was still angry, but somehow also pleased that yet another thing had become like before.

When they came into the doctor's office, the psychiatrist first greeted Ashley cheerfully and then briefly also Judith. Then he turned directly to Ashley.

– So there, I have heard that you want to talk about your medicines, because you think that they don't work so well. Can you show which medicines you are supposed to take? I hope that you have them with you?

Ashley shook her head but Judith put four pill bottles on the table in front of the doctor.

– Now let's see what you have here. We can start with this, Propavan. It has a moderating and calming effect and is mostly used as a sleeping pill. I guess you have difficulty sleeping, nightmares and so? Take two like this just before you go to bed to make you sleep through all night. You will feel so much better after a good night's sleep.

Ashley didn't react to what he said and her mother pushed her a little bit. She made a face.

– So here we have painkillers. Are you hurt anywhere?

– Just in the heart, she muttered sourly.

– Not your physical heart, I guess, you're too young for that. You probably don't need to take them at all. But if you get really pain sometime, perhaps by your wounds, this will help you. Having pain can make anyone depressed.

Ashley snapped at the jar so that it fell to one side. Then she met her mother's eyes and her words of warning so she felt compelled to ask:

– Are these making me like float in the air?

– No, but they can make you slow and heavy in the body. Let's decide like this, don't take these unless you have really, really pain. Do you get, say, a headache then ask your mother for an aspirin instead. Lets see. Paxil. This antidepressants medicine affect the serotonin in the brain so that you become less depressive. These you should definitely take, first one in the morning and then one right after school. You will feel so much better from it, believe me. And they will not make you float either.

– So they will make me become happier then?

– Not directly. Admittedly, they are often called "happy pills" but it's not true. They change certain neurotransmitters so that it reinforces some nerve impulses. One don't really know how it works, but eventually the make depressions fade away. It's very important that you take these every day!

– Well, alright then!

– Alright Ashley. This last medicine is a heavily sedative. Have you had any rages, or bad behavior?

– Not since I came home anyway. Just at that suicide institute. Threw a shoe at the shrink so he got a concussion, I think.

Raymond smiled slightly skewed to the notation of the centre but chose not to comment on it.

– This tablet you received for them to be able to control you easier at the rehabilitation centre. As long as you don't start fighting with your mom you don't need them. It must be these that make you feel as if you are floating.

She reached across the table and took a pencil. Then she put a thick cross over the label. Then she picked up a pill from each jar and put in a small pile on the table.

– This cocktail I got every morning for breakfast and then every afternoon for supper around six. What do you think about that?

– It seems completely unreasonable! Why should you get sleeping pill in the morning? And at six o'clock seems too be much too early, too. And to take painkillers together with sedatives although you don't have pain. I must have a serious talk with their doctor, as this sounds completely insane.

Ashley was really satisfied by the answer and looked at her mother.

– Let's go, Mom!

– Are you sure that you'll take your medicine now? she asked.

– This I'll take mornings and every afternoon, this before I sleep. Nothing else, do you get it?

– That sounds great, Raymond smiled.

Judith sighed with relief and then she drove home. To both their surprise, they found Amy's mother, Erin, on the porch waiting for them.

– Hello, Erin. What are you doing here?

– Hello, Judith. It was a while since we met. I would like to talk to your daughter, if it's okay with you.

– Guess it is, Ashley said. We can talk here, I have no secrets from Mom anymore.

Erin hesitated when she met Ashley's eyes. God, how she had changed. She was so skinny and hollow-eyed. She was like a shadow of the former herself. Erin tried to find a way to say what she came to say.

– Ashley, my friend. I want to tell you that I'm so very, very sorry for what I did last week. It was thoughtless and totally stupid.

– I don't really understand. What did you do last week that was so wrong?

– I took the phone away from Amy because she was sick. I don't regret that, but then when you called I could see that it was you, but I didn't even think that I should answer. But I should have done just that. Not only that, I should have let you talk to Amy, though she was sick. You seem to feel even worse than she did last week. And you need all the support you can get right now, and I refused you her support. You should know that I'm so sorry for that, and I regret it bitterly. It will never happen again, I promise. Can you forgive me?

Ashley were clearly moved by her words.

– There's nothing to forgive. Actually, it's me who should be thanking you for everything you've done for me. It's thanks to you that I'm home from the psyche centre and back in school. Without all the videos with Amy in the wheelchair, I probably had been dead by now. But instead, it actually feels better now, so thank you for that.

– But I have not done anything, actually. It's Amy who has done everything. It was her idea with the wheelchair and she who sacrificed herself.

– And who raised her? Who taught her to be so unselfish? That's nothing one can learn from the Internet, is it?

– Well, when you say it like that.

– It's the way it is. So thank you for making Amy into the amazing person she is, so she wanted to help me survive. Thank you so much.

Erin gave Ashley a hug and wished her good luck and then went home again.

– Honey, that there was absolutely terrific done by you.

– She's still the mother of my best friend. She was really stupid last week, but what will be better if I would rub it in?

– You are so right in there. Very good thinking there.

– And who raised me, then?

Judith looked at her and could not help laughing a little. Now it felt like everything was going to work out. Ashley had started to laugh sometimes, she would take her medicines and she seemed to begin to enjoy school. Now nothing could go wrong anymore?

But she should not have thought that, because the worst had not yet come.



CHAPTER 7

# The party



Ashley rolled through the front door of the house where John lived. She wondered what she was doing here, after all. It was John's birthday and had invited everyone in the class to this party, and more than half the class had accepted. Amy had been nagging at Ashley that she would also come, and now she was here. Sure, it could be fun to go to a party again, but at the same time she could not dance. She rolled up to the punch bowl which stood on a table and poured herself a drink.

She asked John if the drink surly was without any alcohol, and John promised that it was, as he was a non-drinker.

She thanked him and took the mug in her hand and began to roll into the room. It was quite complicated to both roll and keep the mug so it didn't work so well for her. Suddenly Roger came up to her. He was captain of the football team at school. He was handsome and always had many girls who swarmed around him. He smiled at her and offered himself to carry her drink. He put down the mug on a table that stood somewhat aloof in a corner of the room. Then he sat down there too, and he began to talk about everything with her and she was flattered that he seemed interested in her. When her glass was empty he filled it for her. He was so kind and helpful and got snacks and continued fetch drinks from the punch bowl.

After a while she began to feel sleepy, and soon she nodded off in the wheelchair. Soon she slept heavily. Suddenly she woke with a start. She found her self laying on her back almost naked with Roger lying on top of her. She opened her mouth to scream but then he put his hand to her mouth and hushed to her. When she tried to hit him he took her arms and pushed them down with his right hand while he kept covering her mouth with his left hand. Her head was spinning but she still noticed that Roger had pulled down his pants too. Eventually she managed to bite his finger so he let go of her mouth so she opened it to scream. But then Roger pressed a pillow over her face instead, and locked her arms on top of if. He was very strong and heavy and she barely got any air.

Meantime Amy had begun to look for Ashley upstairs because she heard that she's been with Roger and knew of his reputation. Suddenly she heard a muffled scream and rushed into the bedroom. She saw Ashley without her skirt and panties and with her blouse unbuttoned. Roger lay on top of her while he held her arms and pressed the pillow against her face while she struggled to get free. Amy shouted so that the hair on Roger's head curled up and then rushed over and began clawing at Roger to make him he let go. Several others came rushing towards the room so Amy quickly threw a blanket over Ashley. Roger realized that it was over and crashed out of the room jumping with both feet together with his pants around his shins.

Ashley lay crying in bed so Amy screamed that everyone should leave the room immediately. Then she helped Ashley by buttoning up her blouse and put on her panties and skirt. Ashley was completely limp from the shock but allowed herself to passively be helped without saying a word, she just sobbed in despair. She held her hands hidden in her face while she let Amy drive her out of the room and began to climb down the stairs. Two guys came running and carried down her while she was still sitting in the wheelchair. Downstairs there was total chaos. John had taken a baseball bat and was yelling at Roger who tried to explain himself as he fled out the front door to avoid being beaten. John swung and hit the door frame. Several of the girls throw words against him, which was not suitable for their age.

Once the door was closed there was complete silence. The only sound was the sound of Ashley cried loudly. Amy hugged her and said:

– Ashley, I hope you understand that none of this is your fault. Roger is gone now, and you're among friends here.

She felt a strong stench of booze and realized to his shock that Ashley was drunk. The others also tried to comfort her without success. She didn't say a word, but suddenly she took up her phone.

– Mom, come and get me. No, not at midnight as we said, and not in a moment. Come and get me *now*!

Judith got really scared when she heard how Ashley was crying uncontrollably and threw herself in the car and drove to the house. When she came in everyone was gathered around Ashley trying to comfort her. John, who opened the door, apologized to Judith but was given no chance to explain anything before she angrily swept past him on the way over to Ashley. She briefly said with tears in her voice:

– Take my wheelchair, Mom! I want to go home! Now!

Judith looked angrily at the others and drove her out to the car and home. Ashley didn't say a word all the way home, just kept sobbing. When they got home, she requested to be taken to the bathroom and then she sat in the shower for a long time, much longer than usual. Judith was standing outside, being worried, lis-

tening. “There’s nothing dangerous in there” she thought. But she heard how Ashley constantly washed and scrubbed herself. Finally, she rolled herself out and directly into her room without a word, and lay down in bed.

– Ashley, you have to tell me what happened? Have they been cruel to you tonight? Everybody? I need to know what happened. What has this John done to you, actually? Oh my God, I’ll kill him if he was mean to you.

Judith tried to appear strong, but could not help but get tears in her eyes too. Ashley realized that she had to say something.

– But, Mom, Johnny hasn’t done anything wrong. It’s that scumbag Roger who tried to rape me. But Amy saved me at the last second. But I don’t want to talk about it now, I just don’t have the strength.

– My God, what did you say? Rape! That’s terrible! Especially considering how you are feeling right now! Oh my God, I probably have to sit here at your bed all night so you don’t...

Ashley looked reproachfully at her with her eyes red from crying.

– Mom, I’m really sad from this, but I’m not depressed. I promise. See you in the morning, go to sleep now! I’m so tired that I can’t keep my eyes open right now.

Judith went to bed but could not sleep. My goodness, Ashley had just begun to get over her depression and suicidal thoughts, and now this! Maybe everything was ruined! Would she have the strength to start all over with Ashley?

Meanwhile, John realized that the party was over, for no one felt anymore to party.

– Sorry, Johnny. It’s not your fault, but it feels as if the whole party mood is ruined now.

– I understand. Fuck that, Roger. Hey! All leave their glasses and mugs right where they are. Mark, can you come here?

– Sure, Johnny. What do you want?

– You're a chemistry geek. Also, you are totally honest. Can't you take samples of all the glasses here. I want to know how Ashley could get drunk, because I for sure have no booze in the house.

– Sure, Johnny. I'll take care of it.

Judith was laying in her bed, twisting and turning all night. She peeked into her daughter's room several times. She also seemed to be sleeping uneasily, but she slept anyway. In the morning she came up as usual, but was far from her normal mood. She asked for painkillers and got somef tablets. Then Judith said that she must tell what happened, so Ashley told her everything she remembered.

– My God, that is totally terrible! Such a pig, that Roger. Now when you are just starting to feel a little better, he'll do something like this!

– Yes, it was really terrible. But now I must hurry, I'm about to miss the bus to school.

– You can stay home today. I'll call the school and tell them you are sick.

– Sit at home and brood? No thanks! I'm leaving now. We'll talk more later.

– Just one more thing, honey. You smelled booze last night. Have you really been drinking alcohol, even though you are not allowed to?

– No, Mom, I promise. I know it's dangerous together with my medications. Johnny promised that there was no alcohol in the house. But.... wait a bit! It was Roger who gave me my drinks all the time. That bastard must have spiked my drinks! This can explain why I was so dizzy and why my head was spinning. I have not drunk alcohol by choice, Mom, it must have been him. Now I must go. Bye buy, don't worry, I've managed worse crises already.

She missed the bus anyway and were late for the first class, rolling in while everyone looked at her. Her face was completely expressionless as she rolled up to her place. None of those who were at the party had expected that she would turn up. Roger was onto her throughout the whole class and tried to whisper and gave her funny faces. Ashley was completely distracted throughout the class, totally con-

trary to her usual active participation. At the first break she quickly rolled out into the hallway, but was stopped by Amy.

– How are you today? Oh my God, I can't believe you have the strength to come to school today. Had it been be, I'd just been at home crying all day.

– Mostly I'm pissed of. Can you do me a favor? If I come late to the next lesson, can you tell the teacher that I'm coming? I have something to do.

Amy promised that and Ashley then rolled straight into the principal's room without even knocking. He was a bit annoyed, especially as he was quit busy. But when he saw the tears in Ashley's eyes he put the papers aside to listen to her. She told him everything that happened, and the principal got really upset and promised to deal with it. The entire rest of the morning, many of her classmates was called to the principal's office one by one to the teacher's surprise. Those who hadn't been at the party didn't understand what was going on. Mark also told the principal about his investigation. He had found alcohol only in Rogers and Ashley cups. At last, he also called Roger. He however felt sure what it was about.

– You certainly understand why you are called here, the principal began. I've got a pretty clear picture of what happened last night, but want to hear your side of the story too.

– Hey, I don't get it. All the girls want to be with me, so why would I have to force anyone? Ashley wanted it, you know.

– Can you explain why your and Ashley's glass contained alcohol, but no one else's glass? No alcoholic was as you know served at the party.

– I don't know. Maybe the girl brought it to loosen up a bit.

– Do you seriously want me to believe that Ashley would bring alcohol to the party to spike her own *and* your drink? Ant that despite the fact that she are taking psychotropic drugs, which makes every intake of alcohol to a health risk.

– It must have be her.

The principal just shook his head. He continued to squeeze Roger but he just got tangled up in several lies and unreasonable assumptions. The principal finally told him to return to class while he would consider about it.

At the lunch break Amy looked for Ashley to eat with her as usual. But she could not find her in the dining room so she started searching for her, but she was gone. She started to become scared and asked around for anyone who had seen her. Finally she found a girl who had seen her roll towards a door at the back of the school. Amy went there and saw tire tracks in the snow on the way to a grove. She began to run following the tracks in the snow. Then she saw the empty wheelchair. A bit away from the wheelchair she saw someone laying face down in the snow.

– Ash! ASH! she screamed in panic.

She ran to the figure with bad feelings. When she arrived she hardly dared touch her for fear that she'd killed herself. But then she heard the sobs and grabbed her and turned her over. Ashley cried desperately but had heard that it was Amy who come so she put her arms around her and cried on her shoulder.

– Ash, please Ash. I know it's hard right now, although I can't possibly understand how you feel. But it will go over and get better. Both I and everyone else in the class are on your side and we will all help you.

– I feel so dirty. But the worst is that everyone in the class has seen me naked! How will I ever get over it?

– That's actually not true. It's just me and two other girls that actually saw you, and we're already naked in the shower in sports, right? Before any guys came into the room, I already had time to cover you.

– Really?

– I promise! Please don't do something desperate because of this? Like killing yourself? I'm so afraid for your sake!

– Amy, I'm sad and heartbroken right now. But I'm not depressed. No more than before, anyway.

– Nice to hear. Everything will soon get better, I promise. Come on, let's go to the next lesson. I can help you if you want.

The next lesson was sports, so Roger went to the football field behind the gym. But John had already told the coach that he refused to play in the same team as Roger, so on John's suggestion the coach had already talked to the principal. When Roger went out on the field the coach called him.

– Roger, you know that I want all players in the school's football team to be not only talented on the field, but also set a good role model for others also off the field. What you did last night is completely unacceptable, and you are no longer a part of my team. If it turns out that the whole story is a lie you can come back, but according to the principal, there are a lot of witnesses. You can change back you clothes and leave the field now!

Roger walked into the locker room with angry steps. He needed the sport to get a scholarship! Furiously he threw his helmet in a cabinet door, creating a big dent in it. Then he changed clothes and started to look for Ashley. In the afternoon break, he found her in a corridor and stopped her. He made an effort to talk with a really soft, quiet voice in order not to aggravate the situation.

– Ashley, I'm sorry about yesterday, I was drunk and was not thinking. But the coach kicked me out of school football team because you ratted on me to the principal and the team needs me. You must go back to the principal and explain that it was just a misunderstanding, otherwise there will be problems.

– WHAT, Ashley said with a loud voice so that everyone heard it. ARE YOU THREATENING ME? What are you going to do with me? Huh! I'm not afraid of you! A madman has already stabbed me with a knife in my back and put me in a wheelchair for life. Can you top that, huh?

Roger hushed at her to make her lower her voice. But she continued to talk loudly so everyone could hear her.

– Or are you going to kill me, maybe? I've tried to kill myself three times already, so you would do me a favor if you would kill me. So go ahead, give it your best shot!

To Rogers despair a lot of people had gathered around them by now. Sophia, who was the school's most popular girl and moreover rumored to be Roger's girl-friend, asked what happened.

– He tried to rape me yesterday, and now he wants me to take it back.

– What the hell! Is it true, Roger?

– Well, I thought she wanted is, you know.

– First you spike my drinks so I pass out, then you roll me unconscious in a bedroom and holds me down on a bed covering my mouth so I can't scream. Then you lock my arms when I try to hit you. What in all that makes you think that I want it, huh?

– He has actually done the same thing to me once, another girl said. First he lured me to drink until I was too drunk to take care of myself, then he molested me when I was passed out.

– Same with me, but I kicked him between the legs, so he gave up, a third girl said.

– So that's why you tried with Ashley, because she can't kick you! Sophie said with an angry voice.

She gave Roger a slap in his face that echoed through the corridor. Everyone started yelling at him and several of the girls started hitting and scratching him. Sophie came up with yet another slap in the face that made it spin in his head. He got really afraid by the hatred against him so he fled the scene. All the girls were then around Ashley and explained that they were on her side, and that Roger would get hurt next time they saw him. Ashley felt quite pleased when she rolled into the classroom for the day's last class.

When the class began Roger was noticed by his absence. The teacher asked if anyone knew where he was. Amy stood up and said that most of them probably knew, and asked Ashley if she could tell.

– No, Amy. You say nothing!

Ashley sounded angry and rolled abruptly away as if she would leave the room. But to everyone's surprise, she stopped at the front and turned to the class.

– I guess Roger didn't dare to stay here at school because everyone seems to be against him. For those of you who don't know, he tried to rape me at Johnny's party last night. Amy was the one who saved me yesterday. I'm so grateful to you Amy, I don't think I have thanked you yet. You're my guardian angel! Again! Well, all of you who were at the party yesterday was absolutely gorgeous. Sorry I ruined the party for you, and sorry I did not thank you then.

The teacher was shocked and asked if she talked to the counselor or school psychologist about it.

– Guess who I have spoken to! Who called half the class to his office today?

Judith had not got the strength to go to work that day but waited anxiously for Ashley to come home. When she finally arrived, she was surprised that she didn't seem too sad.

– You've been talking with Lisa, right? She's the one who cheered you up!

– No, I was talking to the principal, and now the whole school seems to be on my side. It feels wonderful! Even Sophia, the school's most popular girl, has explained that I only need to ask her if I need anything.

The next day Ashley was called to the principal's office. She rolled there with mixed feelings.

– Good morning, Ashley, he said. Thank you for coming today. As you hopefully understand that this has nothing to do with your disability, but it's about your assault. I have done my best to find out what happened to you, and in what ways the school can help you. But first I want to let you know that Roger has called me this morning and announced that he will not return to school. In view of this, and the fact that it occurred outside of both the school time and the school area, I think it's not worthwhile for the school to proceed in the matter. I hope that you agree with that?

– Sure, sure. The only thing I want is that I don't have to see that scumbag every day.

– Then I want you to know that me and all the staff here at the school supports you. My opinion is that you should press charges with the police against Roger. It must in that case be your decision, but I will happily help you with that if you want.

– Thanks, but I think I let it be.

Ashley rolled out and met the school psychologist who seemed to be waiting for her in the hallway.

– Can't you come in to me for a moment? You know I'm bound by confidentiality and I'm sure that you would feel better if you talked to me about your trauma.

Ashley just snorted at him.

– So you think I feel better by being forced to talk to you?

– There is absolutely no compulsion, you know that. My services are always voluntary but the school has a routine to offer counseling to students suffering trauma. So your disability is not a factor at all, but It's the abuse that you reported to the principal is. And if for some reason you distrust me, I can arrange contact with someone else, that you can get confidence in.

Ashley took a few deep breaths to calm down a bit first, and finally said with as soft voice as possible.

– I'm sorry, but I simply don't want to talk to any psychologist. It has nothing to do with you personally, but applies to all psychologists.

Ashley rolled out, leaving him bubbling from frustration when she realized that he could not help Ashley although he was convinced that she needed support. He didn't know how right he was, as Ashley had dreamed a nightmare about the rape last night, but she hoped that it would pass.

Out in the hallway, Ashley rolled past the school nurse's reception where she stopped. She started to think about something and wondered if the nurse could

help her. Then she rolled into to her office to ask her to investigate something. The nurse had doubts whether she was the right person, but she still did what Ashley asked her to do.

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The whole weekend went by and she had the same recurring nightmare every night. She woke up several times during the nights, sometimes screaming. Judith heard it occasionally and became more and more worried about her. At lunchtime on Monday she called Raymond to ask for advice. He answered very avoiding and said she should give it some more time. Judith was disappointed and started calling around to other psychologists.

Late in the afternoon, she could not hold it any longer, but she called to Ashley's cell phone. There was no answer so Judith was really terrified and called Amy and other classmates to hear if any of they knew something, but no one knew where she was, only that she was not in school. Judith began to fear the worst but eventually Ashley anyway came rolling home to her great relief.

Judith looked at her both angry and relieved.

– Ashley, darling, where have you been? I've been told that you were absent from the last lesson today.

– Typically that they would rat me out. Take it easy, I just had a small errand to take care of on the way home.

– What errand? You must tell me! Don't forget our truth pact. I don't accept that you just disappear like that, and not even answering your phone! What's going on, actually? I'm starting to get really worried about you. Is there something that I should know about how you feel that you aren't telling me?

– Like, Mom, I don't want to, but... It's like this, that... (sigh) ... I'm being raped again every night, Mom. Every night! I can't take it anymore. I can't sleep and even when I'm tired I hardly dare go to sleep because I'm afraid of the nightmares.

– You don't think I've noticed? And do you think I don't know that you wake up screaming every night? That's why I'm so worried. You need help! I have been looking around and found on a nice psychologist who you can talk to. It's a female, quite young psychologist so it should not be too difficult to talk to her.

– Mom!! Don't tell me that you booked a time again? You still don't get it?

– What I get is that you need someone to talk to. You need therapy, and you shall have it.

– But, Mom...

– No "but Mom" now! You don't want me to go easy with you, as you said yourself. And you need therapy, and that it! This psychologist will surely make you feel better, believe me!

– You have to stop doing this, Mom! Don't you get it that what you are doing just makes me feel worse?

– How can it make you feel worse that I want you to have therapy?

– That's not it. Don't you understand yet what I need to gain strength to live? What I need is to believe in myself. Believe that I can handle myself! But how can I believe that if not even you believe in it?

– Oh my God, that's not it. I believe in you, I promise. But sometimes you just need some help, it applies to everyone.

– Maybe, but do you trust that I can take care of myself and all the problems that I suffer? For real?

– Of course I do.

Judith trembled in her voice a bit and it was obvious that it was not entirely true.

– Was that really the truth?

– Well maybe not quite, but I really *want* to believe in you. But I can really trust you? You still have not told me why you skipped class today. Well?

– Do I have to tell you? Please, I don't want to. Ooh, but what the heck, okay then. I was just with him.

– Who are you talking about? You don't mean... you can't mean Roger, do you?

– What! Why would I want to meet that scumbag? No, I was with Raymond, of course. Raymond Richardson. You know him, of course.

– What on earth! What did you do there?

– What do you think people do at a psychologist? Therapy, of course!

– Do you mean that you voluntarily gone to therapy? That's great news! But why didn't you say anything?

– I was a bit ashamed. Like, you know I been so stubborn that I don't want any therapy, and we have fought over it. It's still the case that I don't want to talk to any psychologist about what Raymond called my "wheelchair depression", because it's totally pointless. But It's quite another thing that I need someone to talk about the rape, because the memories from the rape won't leave me alone.

– You don't need to be ashamed, I'm just glad that you are so sensible that you went there yourself. But is it really certain that you went there? I want to believe it, but it sounds so unlikely.

Ashley sighed and took out her phone and dialed a number. When she got an answer she switched on the speaker and put the phone on the table in front of them.

– Hello Raymond, it's Ashley here.

– Well, hello, Ashley. What do I owe the honor? Is there a problem?

– It's just that my mother didn't believe that I met you. Raymond, she is listening now and I would like you to tell her what times I booked appointments with you.

– Hello Raymond, Judith said.

– Hello Judith. Well, I can now confirm that Ashley was with me in the afternoon and got her first therapy session, and we have booked next on the coming Thursday. What we're talking about I can't tell you, unless Ashley allows me to tell you that also.

– It doesn't matter what you talked about. I feel safe that you makes her feel better, and that's all I need to know. But why didn't you say anything when I called earlier today?

– You must understand that confidentiality between doctor and patient also applies if the patient is a minor. I simply could not tell you then.

– Well, I understand, I guess. But now I know so you can send the bills directly to me instead.

– I will do that, Judith.

– Thank you for helping my daughter, I really appreciate it.

– It's my pleasure. And I mean that, if you're still listening, Ashley.

– I am. You can send all booked times to my mother in the future, so she knows when I'm with you.

Raymond promised to do it, and hung up.

– Forgive me so much that I didn't trust you, sweetheart. But why did you go to Raymond? It was not difficult to open such a subject to a middle-aged man?

– It felt really embarrassed to talk rape and sex with him, so I asked him to sit behind me where I couldn't see him, only hear him. Like, he is the only psychologist I trust from everyone I met. Have you not checked the time? It's after working hours. He gave me his private mobile number. It shows that he really cares, right?

– It really does.

– Didn't you notice that when you forced me to go there, he must have seen that I was angry and didn't want to be there? It was pretty obvious that it was you who forced me. But still he ignored you completely and just talked with me. It felt

as if he cares about me for real, and I have not experienced that before with any other shrink.

– Yes, I noticed that. Was actually almost a little annoyed until I realized that it was his way of reaching out to you. I know from personal experience that he is both talented and he really cares about how one feel. So how does it feel now? Sure, it feels somewhat better?

– Well, maybe a little. Though we didn't get very far. After we discussed the confidentiality and how I could pay,  I described the rape and so. Then it was not much time left. But we have booked a new meeting already on Thursday.

– You insist on calling it "rape" now. But you've said before that it was only an attempted rape. It's not that you've left anything out, perhaps memories you suppressed before? I getting worried, what was it, really?

– It was a rape, Mom. But not the way you think. I told Raymond what Roger did, the same as I already told you. He said that what he did both legally, morally and emotionally is considered as rape. Though not a "finished" rape. Yet nevertheless a rape.

– Then I understand what you mean.

– You know what? It actually made me feel better that he explained that it was a real rape and not just an attempt!

– How's that?

– Like, think like this. If someone hits you to get pain, right? Perhaps in several days and weeks afterwards. Nothing strange about that. But suppose someone tries to hit you, but misses. Perhaps because someone else intervenes and stops him. Then you have no pain afterwards, right?

– Well, that's obvious. But what does that have something to do with this?

– Like, I told you that I was the victim of an attempted rape, right? An attempt. Not real. So why do I have so much pain right now? Why do I have nightmares? There must be something wrong with me that feels bad for something that didn't happen, I thought. But Raymond has explained that it was not an attempt,

it was for real, so I have every right to feel bad. Now I understand, and it actually feels better. Acceptance is the first step towards healing, he said.

– Well, yes, he has told the same to me too.

– By the way, I got a prescription for stronger sleeping pills, so I can sleep at night. They are addictive, so I can only use them for up to two weeks. I tried to collect them on the way home, but they refused to give them to me. They said that I was a minor.

– Bring the prescription and let us go there!

So Judith and Ashley went down to the pharmacy and Judith scolded the store clerk because he had refused to give Ashley the medicine.

– Do you think that you are more talented than a doctor, or what? If a doctor says that my daughter needs these pills, so you should not object. The only thing you can possibly do is to call the doctor to verify that the prescription is genuine.

Judith went on so hard that the store manager came out from his office. He confirmed that the clerk should have given the medication after checking with the doctor, provided that Ashley could pay for it. When they walked away Ashley thanked her mother warmer than in a long time.

– Thank you to the max, Mom. That was amazing how you defended me. You made me feel that I really should have been able to do it by myself, if he had not been so stupid.

– I'm starting to understand now how that the best for me to keep you, is to set you free. You are strong in some way, and what I really want is for you to become even stronger. I feel so relieved that you started going to therapy now. Raymond is actually really good, and I'm sure that you will feel better eventually with his help.

– I certainly hope so.

– But you should not go to a gynecologist, too? I mean, ugh horrible thought. I know you said it was just a at... an unfinished rape. But what if the bastard already did something while you still were unconscious! Should not you check it out? If you accidentally got pregnant? It's only a proposal, not anything else.

– Take it easy, Mom. I have not told you that I went to the school nurse last Friday and asked her to examine me. Like, you see, well, down there. I'm still a virgin, Mom. Surely, that's what you really are asking?

Judith sighed with relief.

– It's good news in any case, in the midst of all this misery. So now I will stop telling you what to do. Instead, I wonder what your plans are now?

– I will continue to go to therapy for the rape until I feel better. And I will continue to go to school and do everything I can to get good grades. Who knows, maybe someday I can also accept that I'm in a wheelchair.

Judith suddenly felt a calm that fell over her. Ashley had been so sensible, she decided that she should start trusting her more for real.

So Ashley continued to go to therapy and the nightmares went away eventually. Ashley felt more and more that the incident at the party rather had made her stronger than worse. She also continued to work hard to catch up with school work and the days became weeks. Not once did she call to Lisa.

But soon she would be rudely reminded of the assault, her depression and everything that happened since then.



CHAPTER 8

# Trial



Ashley struggled hard with her schoolwork. It occupied nearly all her hours out of bed. Judith's biggest worry now was that they had a lot of debts, so Judith began to work yet another job in the evenings, and now had a total of three jobs. But she at least was quite confident that Ashley would not kill herself anymore. It felt as if the memory of the attack began to fade away. But that would change quickly when the phone rang one afternoon.

– Hello, my name is prosecutor Norman Myers. Is it Mrs. Cox, mother of Ashley Cox that I'm talking to?

– Yes, that's correct, Judith said surprisedly.

– Well I'm the prosecutor in the assault of your daughter that took place almost half a year ago. I understand that it's terrible what happened to her, and I really hope you will not be upset because I'm calling. But if so, I apologize. However my problem is that we at the prosecutor's office has been waiting for news from your daughter's psychiatrist when she is strong enough to withstand the trial. Now I find out that she apparently was discharged without being declared healthy so we then waited in vain for an answer. It made me genuinely worried for her mental health. Dare I ask how things are with her?

– Thanks for your concern. She feels despite the circumstances quite well, although she still struggles with depression and to accept the wheelchair.

– It was nice to hear. Now I wonder if you think your daughter would be able to testify in the trial, because if not, we have to probably to ahead it without her participation, and it would be damaging for our case. What do you think?

– Oh my God, I have not even had one thought about the trial, I thought it was over long ago. I have not even wanted to look in newspapers for information about it. If she would be able to testify? I think so, but I have to ask her first.

– Can you please do that and then get back with an answer, then I would be grateful.

Judith felt worried about how Ashley would react, but asked her anyway although after some hesitation.

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A couple of weeks later Ashley was sitting in a room outside the courtroom and waited for her turn. She was pretty nervous, because she had never met her attacker since the assault and she didn't know how she would handle it. Although the prosecutor had said that it didn't matter if she would cry, it could even be good

for the case. But she didn't want to sit there and cry in front of everyone. Amy took her hand and tried to calm her down.

– There will certainly go well. You have become so strong.

– Not as strong as you think. What about you? You are supposed to testify before me.

Amy shuddered.

– Yeah, don't I look forward to it either. It's terrible memories. Just terrible.

Soon it was Amy's turn and she had to describe everything that happened. She found it hard to stay calm, especially when the defense attorney started questioning what she had really seen. When Amy finally was ready and left, a guard came out and called for Ashley instead. She asked the guard to push her wheelchair for the effect.

The guy with the sandy colored hair that stuck the knife into Ashley was trying to seem cocky. His name was George Hunter but when he saw her be being rolled into the room with downcast eyes then he became, however, very troubled by the sight. The reality of what he had done fell over him like a rock when he saw that his victim could not even come in by herself, let alone walk. Ashley could not even get into the witness box with her wheelchair, but had to be lifted in there by two guards.

– Can you say your name for the documentation?

She swallowed a few times and raised her eyes and looked around. Her eyes fell on George, who sat looking down into the table. It was really a chock to see him again. All the memories just came back and she started trembling. She shook her head, and focused her eyes on Norman instead, who repeated the question.

– M– my name is Ashley Cox.

– Thank you, Miss Cox. Could you, in your own words describe the events from outside of Princeton University on September 23 last year?

Ashley closed her eyes to get rid of the sight of George and took a few deep breaths. Then she opened her eyes again and focused on the jury that she had been taught and began talking very comprehensive and calmly.

– I walked down the street with my friend Amy Scott when we met these three guys that came against us. One of them held a large knife in his right hand.

– Do you see any of these people here in the room?

She pointed straight at George.

– He was the one holding the knife.

– I ask the court to note that the witness identifies the accused, George Hunter, Norman said. Please continue to tell what happened next.

– Well, I got a little ahead of my friend because I got scared and started walking faster.

– Protest! Relevance? The witness should refrain from claiming irrational feelings.

The judge looked surprised at the lawyer and shortly dismissed the protest on the grounds that the witness's feelings were highly relevant.

– So, right when he passed me, I felt a terrible pain in the lower back as he drove the knife in my back and my legs just collapsed under me.

– Protest! The witness could not have seen what was happening behind her back.

Ashley looked at the lawyer with a mixture of anger and surprise.

– Can you rephrase it to what you have actually seen, the judge asked kindly.

Ashley looked at the judge instead and nodded slightly.

– I saw him turn the knife in the air and making a motion with his arm that held the knife seconds before I got the pain in my back. I suppose it's possible that something else just happened to come flying and hit my back in the exact same second.

The lawyer grimaced and sat down again.

– Then I felt an even worse pain when he pulled the knife out of my back.

The lawyer put a finger in the air and opened his mouth.

– ... or rather, he bent over me and magically got his knife back again. He had blood all over the knife and his hand. Though may have been ketchup too.

Norman had to hold his hand over his mouth to hide a smile. The lawyer however only looked annoyed.

– So I lay down on the ground and felt my blood pumping out from my back and was in terrible pain. Amy sat down next to me and pressed something directly on the wound. It was if possible even more painful, it felt like I would be cut in half. But according to the doctors she saved my life.

– Protest! Hearsay! She can only say what she knows.

The judge sighed but had to accept the protest.

– Well then I was taken away in an ambulance, but I passed out in the ambulance and don't know anything until I woke up several days later at a hospital. The first thing I knew except the pain was that I could not move my legs. The doctor told me that I was paralyzed from the waist down, and that it's impossible to cure.

Her voice broke and she stopped talking. The prosecutor waited a few seconds before he asked:

– And how did you react to the news?

– I was devastated and felt that my life had no meaning anymore. A few days later I cut my wrist to take my life. Unfortunately, I was discovered by the staff and they stopped...

– Protest! What has happened after the event is not relevant.

– On the contrary, the prosecutor said. It's highly relevant to know the final result of the attack.

– The protest is overruled. The jury is entitled to hear the consequences that the alleged attack had on the victim. As long as it's self experienced then I will allow it. Please continue!

– Like, I didn't want to live, so I got angry when they patched me up and tried to stop them, so they had to put me to sleep. Then I woke up in the psychiatric emergency department. There I was so supervised so I could not try again. But the only thing I could think of was that I wanted to die. There was no reason to live any longer with a life where I would be dependent on others all the time.

Her voice broke and Ashley began to sob loudly and tried to wipe her eyes on her sleeve.

– Protest! Protest! Relevance? Then I require that the witness refrains from emotional outbursts!

– Protest dismissed! I'm beginning get tired of the lawyer! I have already allowed the witness to tell about the consequences. If you continue to protest against the decisions already taken, I will hold you responsible for contempt of court and have you removed! Have you understood?

The lawyer turned red in his face and sat down. Ashley had managed to collect herself enough to continue after receiving a packet of paper tissues by a guard. Norman started feeling bad, but asked anyway.

– Can you describe what happened when you finally came home from the hospital?

– Well, Mom wanted me to stay in the hospital, but I managed to convince my Dad that I felt better if I would be at home. He then managed to finally convince Mom to let me come home. Finally she accepted it, and they took me home.

– So how did it work then?

Ashley sobbed again.

– Like, I just wanted to die because I have no life. I had just lied to get away from the psyche place! So the same day I cut myself with one of my father's razor blades in the bathroom and was taken back into the nut place again. Dad was so

devastated that he just left and we still don't know where he is. We believe that he has committed suicide because of the suicide letter he left!

Now she began to cry uncontrollably again and the lawyer stood up to protest, but sat back down after a firm look from the judge. Norman waited until she calmed down to try once again to find out how she got over her depression.

– How long did it take until the psychologists believed that you were healthy enough to come home finally?

– It took a few months, but in the end the shrink decided that I was healthy enough for Mom to take me home again.

– And then you went back to school, right?

– No, not at all. I waited till she fell asleep at night and crept out to the kitchen. There, I got hold of a knife and cut me again. I still don't understand how Mom could hear me that time. I felt so terribly bad, I could not think of any sensible thoughts anymore. I just wanted to die, die, die!

Now she broke down completely and started crying uncontrollably. The guard filled up with more handkerchiefs and it had become totally silent in the room. The lawyer looked absolutely terrified when he looked over at the jury and saw that most of them also had handkerchiefs in their hands.

– Would you like a break? the judge asked kindly. We can take a break so you have time to gather yourself.

Ashley pulled herself together with an effort and shook her head. She blew her nose loudly and wiped her eyes.

– Now, I ended up in a closed psychiatric department of a rehab centre. A damn, padded cell! But nothing got better there, I became aggressive and threw shoes at the psychologist at therapy and was such heavy medication that I was not human anymore. Nothing they did could make me better, and I'm not healthy even today. Probably I will never be healthy again. I'm forever paralyzed and will probably never be able to be happy again ever.

She burst into tears again and pointed accusingly against George.

– It's because of him! He is the one that ruined my life! I will never be the same person again. My whole life will be torture! I hate him! I hate my wheelchair! I hate my life! Just let me die!!

She uncontrollably bursted into tears again while all the rooms squirmed in discomfort. The lawyer tried to protest against her outburst, and demanded that the prosecutor would control his witness. The prosecutor yelled at the lawyer. Several of the jury cried loudly. The whole room was in an uproar. The judge struck with his gavel onto the table several times to silence the room. Eventually the judge regained the order. Then the prosecutor decided that enough was enough. He could not bring himself to torment Ashley anymore. Honestly, it was not important how she finally got home and back to school.

– The prosecutor has no more questions for the witness. Your witness!

The lawyer stood up and took a stack of papers and prepared to give his provoking questions. While he waited for Ashley to calm down, he looked at the jury and began to hesitate. All but two had also taken out handkerchiefs. Finally Ashley was calm again and turned her reddened eyes towards him. Then he changed his mind, and he realized what he must do and turned to the judge instead.

– Your grace. I ask permission to postpone this hearing until tomorrow so I can get a chance to discuss with my client.

– The prosecution has no objection.

The judge opened his calendar and looked into it.

– There is no possibility to continue tomorrow because I'm on a business trip, but I can postpone it until Wednesday next week.

It was approved by everyone and the judge hit the table with his gavel after giving the normal reminders about not to talk with others about the trial. Ashley was helped out of the room by the guard and then she asked Amy to roll her into the ladies' room. She leaned against the sink to wash her face and get control of herself. Shit, what had been hard! All the memories just came back and her hands shook uncontrollably. Amy did her best to try to comfort her.

Norman was looking for her and had been told by the guard that she was inside the ladies' room and waited outside and became increasingly worried when she didn't come out. After a while, he asked a female police go in to check what was the matter with her. The police went in, walked up to Ashley and asked how she was feeling, but realized that the question was unnecessary when she saw Ashley's face.

– Excuse me Miss, but prosecutor Norman Myers is standing outside and is worried about you. Also, I think he has something to ask. Are you feeling well enough to talk to him, or should I ask him to wait?

– I'll be right out.

The Police woman walked out while Ashley began to wipe her face with paper towels that Amy gave her. Then she asked Amy to roll out her from the room to the prosecutor who stood there with the lawyer waiting for her. Norman spoke with a very soft voice.

– How do you feel now, Miss Cox?

– Do you have more stupid questions to ask?

– I'm sorry, it should be obvious that you are not feeling so good right now. Unfortunately there is one issue that I would like to ask you. The defense lawyer came to me and asked if it could be possible to get a deal on a reduced penalty against that the accused if he pleads guilty to both aggravated assault and attempted homicide. I said no, but he insists that I should ask you.

– In what way it will anything be better for me if he gets a deal?

– The only advantage I can see for you with a deal is that you get a closure, the trial will not continue and you thereby don't have to go through with the lawyer's cross-examination.

– Sure, fine. Though the whole "closure" thing seems so ridiculous. What do you mean with "closure", I'm gonna be an invalid for life! Will I receive any compensation for it?

– I guess you can request monetary compensation for damages from him if he's found guilty as charged by the court.

– Do you think that I will get it?

– The likelihood is quite substantial. However probably not in this trial but you can always seek for damages in a civil process against him when this trial is completed, provided he is found guilty. I think you will be awarded the compensation when all processes are completed.

– How long can it take?

– Well, that's hard to say. Maybe you have to wait with your compensation claim a while in case the ruling of this trial is appealed, as then the appeal must be addressed first. A couple of months at least, maybe longer.

– That long? But if you make a deal with him right now, then what?

– In that case, it's possible that Hunter accepts some compensation as part of the deal, and in that case you will get it much faster.

Ashley sat still, thinking. She actually had a problem which have kept her awake at nights, and that could very well get her to want to commit suicide again if it was not resolved. Maybe she could solve that problem here and now. But at the same time she could not let this George get away with what he's done.

After a long moment as she finally said:

– First I want to meet this George eye to eye and ask him a few things. Only if he agrees to meet me in person, I can consider to discuss an potential deal.

– Are you sure that it's so appropriate for you? I can't accept that you discuss some deal with him, if I'm not present, said Norman.

– It isn't a deal I want to talk about. As I said, I just want to have answers to some questions, that's all.

– As long as I get to be present, I see no problem with it, the lawyer said.

– Forget it! Just him and me, otherwise I don't give a shit about it.

– Hey! That's an impossible request!

– Alright, then we'll see what the jury says instead. I don't care, it's not me that are heading to prison.

– Well, okay then. It's completely against the principles, but I will ask him anyway, the lawyer said.

It didn't take long time until Ashley sat waiting together with the prosecutor in a room without windows. Amy had said goodbye and gone home. The door opened and George arrived with his lawyer and a prison guard.

– Just him and me. No others! Shoo!

After a lot of hesitation Norman went out together with the lawyer and finally the guard closed the door behind him. Ashley stared at George who could not meet her eyes. She was silent for a long time just staring and George who became increasingly insecure and looked down into the table in front of him.

– Look me in my eyes when I talk! Otherwise, you can forget about a deal!

George looked up and met her gaze with an effort.

– Do you understand what you've done to me! Look at me! Look me in the eyes and admire your work! I'm a wreck, and it's your fault. My spine is destroyed and I can never walk again. LOOK AT ME! It's not the table that's talking to you. It's me, and I want to know why. Why have you done this to me? Answer me!

George swallowed and had very difficult to say anything at all. Although she was small and weak, and moreover was in a wheelchair, right now she was extremely frightening for him. It felt as she held his fate in her skinny hands.

– I don't know, he said quietly.

– You don't know! What's that for an answer? You stuck a knife in my back and made me a cripple. You must surely know why!?!

– Well, I was stoned and drunk and tried to be tough. I didn't understand what I did, I only intended to put the knife in your backpack but missed. I'm so sorry, it's so terrible to see you like this...

– There can't be anything against what it feels like to me. Are you aware that I've dreamed nightmares about you and what you have done every night for six months? You crushed my life! You crushed my dreams! You crushed my future! Can you understand what you've done? You are the reason I want to kill myself!

George broke down and started crying. He tried to wipe his eyes on his sleeve and looked down into the table again.

– LOOK AT ME! You look me in my eyes all the time, your scumbag! It's the least I can ask for!

He flinched as if she hit him and tried to meet her eyes again, but could not see anything through the tears. She took the pack of paper handkerchiefs that she got from the guard and threw it straight into his face. He took one out and tried to wipe his eyes and nose.

– So you want a lower sentence? Have you thought about that every day of every week of every month of every year throughout the rest of my life I am punished in this wheelchair? What is that for kind of justice?

– Well, if there was a knife here, I would let you stab it in my back. I'm so terribly sorry. There is nothing I can say or do that's enough to be forgiven. If only I could turn back time, but I can't.

His voice broke down and Ashley began to soften slightly. But then she decided that she was not satisfied yet. This was her chance to take revenge on him, and at the same time teach him a lesson for life. She dragged herself over to a chair and pushed the wheelchair towards him.

– Sit in this! And tie your legs to it with your belt! Then get a Coke for me in the vending machine down the hall. But if you get up from the wheelchair or get the least help you can rot in jail.

George dared nothing else but to obey. He sat down in the wheelchair, tied up his legs and took the coins that Ashley threw at him across the table. He rolled up to the door, got it opened with an effort but got stuck on the threshold. He waved repellently toward the astonished guard who wanted to help and finally managed to cross the threshold and get out.

– Close the door behind you, Ashley shouted.

It was really difficult to close the door because the chair was in the way. Then he rolled down the hall with an effort followed by the guard. He tried to put the money in the coin slot but it was slightly too high up, something that Ashley already had found out earlier. He dropped the coins on the floor. He swore and struggled to reach down to the floor and pick them up. Then he stretched himself to the utmost and managed to insert the coins with his fingertip after a few attempts. Then he took the Coke can in one hand and tried to roll back with just the other hand. He found it difficult to roll straight and crashed straight into a wall and squeezed his fingers between the wheelchair and the wall. Finally, he came to the door but could not open it because it opened outwards. It took several minutes until he got it opened and then he got stuck on the threshold again.

– Close the door behind you, she said when he finally had fought his way in.

Then he was forced to cross the threshold again to catch the door and then roll backwards to enter again. When he finally handed the jar to Ashley he was dripping equally from sweat and from tears. He begged and begged to be allowed to leave the wheelchair but she said no.

– Do you understand now how my life has become? It's the same hell as you have just experienced, though with no end! How many thresholds are you passing in a day? Let's say there are twenty, back and forth it becomes forty passes. How many times will it be in a year? Around 15 000, isn't it? If I then live a normal life, I have at least 75 years left. How many thresholds will that be? Over a million! Sit down and count to a million and imagine that each number is a threshold.

George felt increasingly nauseous and was shaking from all the sobbing. Just the thought of it was unbearable!

– Then there are all the doors and sidewalk edges too. And narrow aisles. Stairs. Bathroom visits. In and out of cars. Do you understand what life I have to look forward to? Do you understand what you've done? Do you?!?

George was completely destroyed. He asked for mercy, to be allowed to stand up. He apologized and said he was not worthy to live more, but would kill himself.

That was what led Ashley to finally calm down with her attacks. She didn't want to be the one that provoked a suicide, not even if it was he.

– Give me back my wheelchair now and fetch the others so we can discuss a possible deal!

He stood up relieved and rolled over the wheelchair to her and helped her sit down in it. Then he opened the door and asked the others to get back in. They looked at him and Ashley and wondered what actually happened, because it was George who seemed completely broken down while Ashley seemed collected. When everyone had seated themselves again, the she was the one who started.

– I can accept a deal only if George is also prepared to pay a compensation to me, right now. It must be large enough so that my mother can pay all debts that she got because of me and my problems. In addition, my college fund has to be restored, because it was drained to pay the hospital bills.

– Of course we can discuss compensation, the lawyer said. What amount do you have in mind?

– I want two hundred thousand dollars. That's the size of the debt that we have now.

– That's completely unthinkable. It's way above what is common practice, the lawyer said.

– I agree to it, George said quickly. If I sell my apartment, car, phone, and everything else I'll get enough.

– But it's quite excessive. If there should be such high damages compensation then the prison sentence be extremely short. Not more than five years.

– Five years will be good. Half with probation, Ashley responded.

Norman looked at her, and now it was his turn to protest.

– Hey, you should not reduce the penalty that the lawyer suggests! Do you realize that Hunter with your proposal is out from prison already in two years? You should raise the lawyer's suggestions so you can meet in the middle. Also, you

shouldn't suggest anything at all really, for it's me who decide about the potential deal. Ten years unconditional, at least!

– Damages is 200,000, five years imprisonment, half on probation. That's my final offer, Ashley said. And dare not go against me, otherwise I will give you nightmares for the rest of your life when I give up on life and commits suicide!

The prosecutor and the lawyer stared at her in surprise. It was as if she had taken over the negotiation. Although Norman felt bad about it, he felt at the same time that he could accept the punishment as she suggested. Especially when she was happy with it, despite the fact that the time in prison was far too short in his opinion.

George was almost in shock. His victim, whose live he had ruined forever, gave him a break. Just two years in prison! She was almost nice to him! His conscience felt like a pincushion. But that was the deal which was finally signed. The only condition was that George had to promise that he had to come up with all the money before the trial resumed, otherwise the deal was off.

Judith had not been able to attend the trial because she was working too much. In the evening she asked what had happened.

– It was awful. I wept like a child and could barely talk. I really hope that I will never have to do that again.

– And what punishment he get? For he was convicted, I assume?

– He did not pleaded guilty, and the trial is not finished yet. It will continue on Wednesday, and I can't say anything until it's completely finished. The judge was very clear about it. I'm sorry, but you must wait.

Judith was not at all happy but had to accept it.

~ ~ ~

On Wednesday, Ashley was back in court watching as the judge read through the deal between the prosecutor and George. He grimly wrinkled his eyebrows and looked up.

– Miss Cox. Could I talk to you in private in my chamber?

When they were alone the judge questioned the deal and called it absurd.

– This deal means in practice that the accused are out on the street again in two years, because he already spent six months in custody and will receive half the time on parole. Are you aware of this deal and if so, how can you accept it? It's not giving you justice at all for the crime you have been subjected to and its consequences.

– I hate that man more than anything else. I hate him so much and so intensely and that is one thing that has driven me to my suicide attempts. I wish him all the evil in the world, but revenge is also a destructive emotion that doesn't make me become whole again. Not until I can meet hatred with love, I can heal my soul. Therefore I'm fully satisfied with the punishment stated in the deal.

– It sounds very noble, but I still think the penalty value is considerably higher. If he would had been found guilty by the jury, and the indications are that he will be just that, then I probably would impose at least thirty years unconditional imprisonment, maybe more. Then, this seems quite absurd, don't you agree?

– If the trial will continue, I get no compensation here. Then there must be a new, civil, trial, and I have to suffer through this hell again. Not to mention all the appeals that I have to survive. Also, we will end up on the street as homeless long before I get any compensation, and I will accuse myself of it and become suicidal again. With this deal we can pay our debts, I have money to go to college and I have a future again.

– But it feels as if you are selling your restitution for money, is it really the right thing to do?

– Restitution, what is that? I'm convinced that George will come out as a better person after two years instead of becoming a professional criminal after thirty years. That had not been easy for me to live with. There is no punishment that you can dish out to him can get me up from this wheelchair anyway. Believe me, this deal gives me an opportunity to let the past be the past and instead focus on my future.

The judge looked very thoughtfully at her for a while. Then he nodded and they returned to the courtroom. Then he said:

– I have been informed that the accused has made a deal with the prosecutor and want to say something.

George stood up and turned towards Ashley.

– I plead guilty to aggravated assault against Ashley Cox and the attempted murder of the same. I renounce thus the right to a jury. Furthermore, I apologize to you, Ashley, for all the pain I caused you. I don't expect you to forgive me for what I have done because what I've done is totally inexcusable.

George's voice was becoming unsteady and he rubbed his eyes with his sleeve.

– It's so terrible, what I've caused you, but I want you to know that I regret what I have done from the bottom of my heart. If only I could undo it... or if I could take your pain...

His voice broke and Ashley felt that perhaps she should answer something.

– Don't think that I will ever be able to forgive you. However, I'm tired of hate, so I will try to put this behind me and instead focus on what I can actually do in the future. I suggest you try to do the same.

No eye was completely dry in the room when the judge finally spoke.

– Then I thank the jury for your work. You are hereby relieved of your duties. George Hunter, I hereby sentence you to five years' imprisonment with the possibility of parol after half the time. You are obliged to pay damage compensation to Ashley Cox in accordance with the deal. If you don't fully pay this compensation within a week, I will transform your punishment to forty years in prison without possibility of parole. You are also compelled to abstain from all drugs and alcohol throughout the punishment. With this, I declare that this proceedings as closed.

The judge demanded that George and Ashley would come to his chambers along with the lawyer and the prosecutor, who pushed Ashley's wheelchair.

– Now the only remains is for you, Mr Hunter to somehow transfer the compensation to Miss Cox's bank account. When do you expect to do that?

– I can do it here and now, if I may borrow a computer.

He was allowed to borrow the judge's computer and logged in to his bank. Ashley was sitting and seemed totally absent fingering on her phone. Then George said that he was ready and the judge asked him:

– May I ask how you found this sum of money, and I can trust that you actually sent them?

– I wrote a letter to a friend who sold my apartment and car. He also laid out like everything I own to online auctions, my furniture, telephone, household items, everything except some clothes. The last 20 000 I was able to borrow from his father. I'm an orphan, as you may know.

– Well. Then I would like to ask you, Miss Cox, if you can check your account the next coming days.

– It's okay, she said. I've got the money already.

She held up her phone and showed that she had not just been playing with her phone, but had logged into her own bank account from the phone while she fingered it, and the account showed that is just got a deposit of $ 200 000 to it.

The judge returned the phone to Ashley who then thanked the judge and Norman and then she rolled out of the room. All but Norman had long faces of surprise at how quickly and easily she came out through the door and across the threshold. Judith had just arrived home from her first job for the day when Ashley came through the door.

– Hello, is the trial is already finished? It was fast today! How did it go, what punishment he got to the end?

– There was not much to trial, he pleaded guilty and the judge gave him five years, half on parol.

– WHAT! Just five years? On parol, then he is out already in two and a half years!

– Actually already in two years, they reduce it by the six months in custody.

– That's a disaster. Two lousy year to make up for making you to ... to ... a crippled and ... and ...

Her voice broke down and Ashley hugged her.

– Take it easy, Mom. I'm fully satisfied myself because there are more, and that is good news. But first I want to ask you something. You must be completely honest, now, we have promised that to each other. How is the situation of our economy, really?

– It's fine, I guess. We don't have much, but we will manage.

– Really? You, like, have three jobs.

– Yes, that's why we're manage it.

– Come here, Mom.

She rolled into the work room and began to rummage through a pile of papers. Judith was a little worried as she knew what was in that pile. Ashley found the paper she was looking for and showed it to her mother.

– What is this Mom?

– Well, it's a paper from the bank, but...

– Like, it says here that the bank will take the house within less than a month if you don't pay like forty thousand. Right?

– Well, yes. But you don't have to worry. I'll take care of it. We will not lose the house, I promise!

– How, then, Mom? What is your plan?

– I just take out a loan before the end of the month.

– A loan to pay a loan? And when you can't pay that, you take a new loan to pay off the loan you took for this loan. Or what?

– Ashley, I don't want you to worry. You're getting so much better now.

– So you mean that when the bank comes and throws us out and we have pack a bag and start living on the streets, then I will not be worried? Mom, exactly how

much do we owe? You must tell me. It will not be better if you pretend it doesn't exist! How much?

– I don't exactly know...

– Come on, Mom. It's obvious that you know. You are sitting there sometimes for several hours checking papers and counting. I have seen you. Well?

– It's... It's maybe around a hundred...

– Approximately 98 000, isn't it? I've checked the bills when you have been at work, Mom. Then, I believe my collage fund is gone too. 100 000.

– We solve it somehow. Don't worry. I don't want you to worry, you have so much own worries right now.

– Mom, if we become homeless because of our debt, then I will feel as if it's my fault. Furthermore, what future do I have if can't go to college? I will not be able to cope with it, don't you understand that? What do you think I will do when we are forced to live in two cardboard boxes behind the station?

Judith put her face in her hands and tried not to cry. My God, she had to be strong for her daughter. But she couldn't find anything more to say. Suddenly Ashley put her phone in front of her. She picked it up and looked at it without really understanding.

– You have... You have several hundred thousand in your account. Is there a mistake from the bank?

– No, It's the compensation I forced him to pay as part of the deal. It's because that was so large that he didn't get so many years.

– So you kind sold out your chance to obtain justice?

– Not at all. I demanded to talk to him alone first, to see if he really regretted what he had done. He was truly repentant, for sure.

– You talked to him directly? How did you cope with that? It must have been extremely hard for you to expose yourself to it!

– There was more painful for him, I promise.

Ashley could not help but smile of remembrance.

– I broke him down completely, emotionally, until he begged for mercy. You should have seen him, he cried like a baby. It was all the amends I need, to know that he's learned his lesson. In fact, what he has done is a few seconds of a mistake, then why should he be punished his whole life for it?

– I don't understand how you can be so forgiving to him considering the problems he has caused you.

– Don't think that I have forgiven him, I haven't. But my problem is not getting less if I brood on the past. Now I want you to pay all your debts, Mom, so that we can look into the future without worries.

– But it's you who received the compensation. You have to keep some if it to buy something nice for yourself.

– I don't want his money. If I used the money to buy something that I really like for myself, then I'd just feel bad when I saw that thing because I would know from whom the money came from. Just take the money, I don't want to have anything to do with it!

Judith smiled at her and said that she understood. It would be so nice that neither of them would have to worry about their economy anymore. She sat down by the computer and started paying the debts. It felt as if there wasn't anything any longer that could get Ashley to feel bad again.

But soon she would be brutally reminded of her daughter's problems.

☆ ☆ ☆

CHAPTER 9

# Cecilia



The atmosphere in Jacob's office were definitely tense. The couple in front of him was undoubtedly very upset and that made him quite worried as they were prominent and were used to getting what they wanted.

– As true as my name is Vance Hampton-Gallant, I have never experienced such nonchalance ever before. I demand that you no more will waste any more time finding a method that can help our daughter out of her depression and apa-

thy. Your institution have a good reputation, but in my opinion it seems as if this rumor is to be greatly exaggerated.

– I assure you, Mr Hampton-Gallant that we are doing everything in our power to break the apathy of your daughter Cecilia. But unfortunately it seems that she completely turned off and not even our best therapist has managed to get her to say one single word, or otherwise show any kind of reaction.

– It is not acceptable, Phoebe said, who was Cecilia's mother. We are paying you such a high amount that you have to solve this. She has been here for almost two months and we have not seen the slightest improvement. Our patience is running out.

– An adequate description of our position, Vance continued. If we have not seen some kind of improvement in the next seven days, I will sue this institution for deliberate negligence. You will not be able to attract any single customer when my lawyers are finished with you, I can assure you that. We will have a new meeting with you in exactly seven days, next Monday, and at that time you have to be able to present some form of progression.

– I promise you that we will do our very best to get through to your daughter this week, Jacob answered wiping his forehead.

As soon as the Hampton-Gallant couple had swept out from the department Jacob called an emergency meeting with the entire staff to try to figure out what they could do. Several suggestions were made from different kind of medication to extended therapy, but nothing seemed to be some sort of innovation. Larry began to look thoughtful and eventually presented a proposal.

– Why don't we ask Ashley if she wants to come here and talk to Cecilia?

Jacob looked at him with an angry face.

– What is that for a stupid idea? In what way could that help?

– Well, she's about the same age, same gender, and above all, she has the same experience. She has been depressed because she was forced to live in a wheelchair for the rest of her life, and has been hospitalized here for it. The difference is that

Ashley obviously gotten over her depression and are handling herself quite well in her wheelchair.

– You can't possibly know that, unless you against my direct orders had contact with her after her discharge.

– What I do in my free time is my business. I happen to know that she is back at school now, and that there isn't even a hint that she is still suicidal.

Now Micheal became excited.

– He's actually right! She gets a credibility with Cecilia that none of us can even come close to. If Ashley tells Cecilia that she will be able to live in a wheelchair then she must believe in it, because Ashley herself lives in a wheelchair. In addition, Cecilia will identify herself with Ashley as a result of their similarity in age and gender. If anyone can get her to react then it is a girl of her own age.

– I absolutely don't like the idea, Jacob protested. The is a huge risk that her aversion to this place and her suicidal tendencies can rub off on Cecilia.

– Nevertheless, Cecilia has already tried to kill herself, and we must do something new. Her apathy is so deep that none of my therapy sessions with her has resulted in even the smallest reaction from her. Do we actually have any other choice then to ask Ashley?

Jacob continued to protest but was forced to accept that there were no other ideas. Finally he ended the meeting and reluctantly went home to Ashley because he realized that there was no chance at all that she would come to Princeton House herself. Judith was home because she worked the evening that day. She was surprised when she opened the door.

– Excuse me to bother you like this, Mrs. Cox. I wonder if it is possible to have a word with your daughter?

– Of course, Jacob. Come in and I will call her. She's at home as it is no school this week. But please call me Judith as you did before.

She shouted at Ashley who came out of her room, but stopped when she saw who had come. Her mother looked firmly at her and said that in any case she

must listen to what Jacob had to say. She looked glum but approached anyway and sat down across from him at the kitchen table. Jacob asked kindly but firmly that Judith would have to leave the kitchen, because of "confidentiality".

– Thank you for taking the time to talk to me, Miss Ashley.

– What do you mean with "Miss Ashley"? All my friends call me just Ashley. But you can say "Miss Cox" instead.

– Of course, Miss Cox. The reason why I came her is that we have a patient which we would like you to talk a little with to cheer her up a bit. You will, of course, be payed for it. She is a year younger than you and has recently lost both her feet and half a leg in a car accident. She is so deeply depressed that she has become completely apathetic. It's not possible to get the slightest reaction from her, neither verbal nor visual. She just lies down staring straight ahead crying and are not doing anything at all. She eats only if she gets fed, and wets the bed rather than call for help to go to the bathroom. We simply want you to talk a little with her.

– Admit that you don't know what to do! Admit that you have actually given up and that is why you are asking me for help, even though I don't have any education.

Jacob realized that he had to really make an effort to convince Ashley, so he chose not to argue back.

– I admit that what we have done so far has not worked. Michael is convinced that you can get through to her because you have similar experience as she has.

– But you don't seem to believe it. So just to fuck with you, maybe I'll do it.

– You're right that I don't believe in the idea. But this is not about me, Micheal's or the department's reputation. It is about a very sick girl who needs help. You'll get $100 for each day you come to visit her and stays for at least one hour trying to talk to her.

Ashley sat still and stared at him. He began to squirm and swore inside that he was forced to sit here and beg her for help, though he didn't want it.

– Shit, how I hate you and your whole damn department. But mostly I hate you because for once you are right. Okay then, I will try to talk to her. But I don't know if I will succeed. You'll have to drive me out to that suicide institute and show me where she is laying.

Jacob thanked her and drove her to the rehab center and gave her a tag that unlocked the doors to the department and to Cecilia's room. Then she rolled to her room with pounding heart. How would this go? Maybe she had taken water over her head? But at least she had to try, for the girl's sake.

– Hello to you, Cici, my name Ashley but my friends call me Ash! Is it okay if I sit here chatting with you a bit? And may I call you Cici?

The girl had her head turned against the wall and did not react, but Ashley still could see that she was awake.

– Turn over a little bit and look at me anyway. You will be surprised, believe me. Hey there, I can see you are awake.

Still no reaction.

– LOOK AT ME, BRAT! Ashley screamed suddenly.

Cecilia jumped to surprise and turned lazily around and looked at Ashley. The only response was that she opened her eyes a little extra when she saw Ashley and her wheelchair.

– That's right, I also sit in a wheelchair. It is not the only thing we have in common, actually. A few months ago I was also locked up in a room at this awful place. You are in the room fifteen, I was in room twelve. It's just two rooms away, because there is no room thirteen. Strange that they don't have that number, are they are superstitious, of what? Are you superstitious, by the way?

Ashley kept on talking without getting any answers, but she had a feeling that Cecilia listened anyway, as she looked her in her eyes all the time. Ashley explained about her assault and how depressed she had became. After some hesitation she also told also about her attempted suicides and how terribly she fancy that the rehab center was. This probably Jacob would not like! Then she proceeded to

tell her about how her current life, that going around in a wheelchair was certainly difficult but that despite everything the daily life went on without major problems.

After little more than an hour of uninterrupted chatter without getting any response from Cecilia then Ashley finally said "see you" and rolled out. Still she didn't really know if Cecilia had listened to any of what she had said, and she felt quite uneasy.

The next day she came a little earlier. This time Cecilia turned around herself when she started talking. But still there was no other reaction from her. But after a while she began to turn a bit and squeeze her legs, but she still didn't showed any facial expressions. Suddenly Ashley understood what the problem was.

– You need to pee, right? The toilet is just there, just jump into the wheelchair here and go peeing. Or do you want to pee in your bed instead?

It was still no reaction from Cecilia.

– Like, I have not wet my bed since I was a baby. Are you still a baby, or what? Pee in your bed like a baby in front of me if you want!

Still no reaction. Ashley began singing "Baby. Baby. Baby". Cecilia looked angry for a second from being compared with a baby. So when Ashley grabbed her hand and pulled, she finally helped to pull herself over to the wheelchair in the way Ashley described. Then she sat still until Ashley told her that she had to roll herself. Eventually she rolled elaborate slowly into the bathroom and performed her needs, cheered on by Ashley. Soon she was back in her bed again and Ashley continued her incessant chatter about everything and nothing.

The door opened and Larry came in. Ashley lit up and rolled up to him and gave him a warm hug.

– It's so nice to see you again, Larry. Long time no see.

– Well, it's not that long time. You look great!

– Thanks for that, I feel great. Are you not surprised to see me here again?

– Well, it was my idea from the beginning to ask you to come here and spend some time together with Cecilia here.

– So you're the one that came up with it! I believe that more than what Jacob implied, that it all came from Micheal.

– No, it's from me, but Micheal was turned on by the idea right away and was probably the one who convinced Jacob. How are you today, then, Cecilia? Isn't it time for you to go to the bathroom now? Come and I will help you before it's too late!

– It's not needed, Ashley said. She has just been there. I helped her a bit.

– You?!? How did you manage that? It is not so easy to lift someone from a bed.

– We can say that we did it together. Cecilia, I hope that you are nice to Larry here. For he is the only one that I actually liked when I was here. His infinite patience and constant helpfulness always made me feel better. Don't you agree that Larry is a pearl?

Cecilia did not answer but Larry felt that she nodded her head. Or was that just his imagination? He smiled at her and said that she should just ask if there was anything she needed and then went out. Ashley's phone beeped and she looked at it and made a face.

– Mom wants me to come home now. We are supposed go out shopping together. I have to go now, but I'll be back tomorrow. And then we go out into the park instead of sitting in here. Wouldn't that be nicer, you think? The weather is wonderful, sunny and warm even though it is only the beginning of April. See you tomorrow!

She rolled out through the door and was stopped by Jacob.

– Well, how are you doing? She has opened up anything at all yet?

– Like, I don't want to tell you how it goes.

– You work for me, you are so good and reports now if you want to be paid! What have you been talking about?

– Do you think for one second that I'm doing this for the money? I do it for Cecilia and myself. You can take your money and put them somewhere where the

sun doesn't shine! But don't even dare to take the tag to the room away from me, because I'll take it up directly with her parents in that case.

Jacob was bubbling with frustration as she rolled away. Cecilia had actually crept up to the door and overheard the conversation. She was astonished over Ashley's audacity. That she dared to talk like that to her own boss! It actually felt like she seemed to care about her for real. Cecilia laid down again and reflected a long time over what Ashley had talked about these two days. She actually had been thinking very much since the day before. Ashley was actually also sitting in a wheelchair, and she seemed not to care about it. But that she would be allowed to go out in the park the next day was unthinkable. But still, the idea was not completely disgusting...

~ ~ ~

Ashley swept into Jacobs office the next day with her skirt fluttering around her legs. He became quite surprise, still quite annoyed from the conversation the day before.

– I'm taking Cecilia out into the park now. She is suffocating staying in here all day. I don't care if you go along with it, just wanted to tell you.

– How do you know she is suffocating? Has she actually said anything already?

– It doesn't matter, I've been here myself so I know.

Jacob was so overwhelmed by Ashley's firm tone, so he said with a feeble voice:

– Wait a moment, I will ask Larry if he can accompany you out. I can hardly allow you to go around alone out there the same way that you and Lisa did.

When Larry came to Cecilia's room he was surprised that she was already dressed and sitting in the wheelchair.

– Nice to see you dressed, Cecilia. Come on now I will help you to get out to the park.

Larry drove Cecilia and Ashley followed them. Cecilia didn't say a single word, and did not seem to care about anything, as usual. Larry pondered how Cecilia could have been dressed and moved to the wheelchair. Had Ashley really done it

by herself? When they arrived at a tree, Ashley put down a blanket on the grass and easily jumped onto it from her wheelchair. Larry helped Cecilia to lie down next to Ashley on the blanket.

– Now I'll leave you to sit on the bench over there and read a book.

Larry walked over to a bench that was out of earshot, but where he could still watch them from a distance. He looked furtively at them and saw that it seemed as if Cecilia actually talked a little bit with Ashley, even if it was not too much.

Cecilia stretched out on the blanket and closed her eyes. The sun was shining, it was a wonderful spring day with the sweet smell from flowers and trees. She felt a pleasure in her body for the first time in a long time from the warmth and fresh air.

– I can't believe you got permission to do this, Ash, she said.

She glanced furtively at the Ashley to see if she responded that she opened her mouth for the first time. But Ashley pretended as nothing and answered:

– Permission and permission. I explained to Jacob that I would do it, and I did not accept a "no" from him. You should understand, Cici, I don't take any crap from him. This place stinks and he is responsible. The best thing that can happen to you is if you can get out of here and back to your normal life and school. Don't worry because you use a wheelchair. I know it stinks but after a few weeks to get used to it and can handle it. Everything just takes a little more time and effort.

– It's so hard.

– Of course it is hard. Do you believe that shit that Micheal and the other states, you only need a bit of training and rehab for everything to become as before? Forget it! I will not lie to you. Sitting in a wheelchair is crappy, but the important thing is that it works. One can handle oneself without help. You can believe in me, for I have not asked for help even once since I left this hell hole.

Ashley continued to talk and actually got some more answers sometimes from Cecilia. She took out some snacks and soft drinks as she had brought and did not have to coax. To Larry's astonishment, Cecilia stuffed her face with one thing after

the other by herself. What had happened? This was incredible! After just a few days?

After several hours they rolled back in again. To Larry's great surprise Cecilia even helped with getting over to her bed again.

The procedure repeated itself both Thursday and Friday with him sitting in the park monitoring them for a few hours while he was reading his book. On Friday Ashley passed Jacobs office before she went home to check out how it would work in the weekend. After some thinking Jacob decided that Ashley herself should be taking Cecilia out to the park, because Larry wasn't working on weekends and also because the workforce was much smaller then.

~ ~ ~

Phoebe Hampton Gallant went in to Cecilia's room as usual to sit there for a while. She felt that it seemed so hopeless to sit there every afternoon and just see how her daughter stared holes into the air. But at the same time she felt that she had to show her that she really loved her, so she had not missed a single day.

This day she stopped in the door to room fifteen. Cecilia was not there! Where the hell could she be? She walked with firm steps down the hall and confronted one of the caretakers who came walking.

– My daughter, Cecilia Hampton-Gallant, where is she? She is not in her room where she usually is! It's Sunday, so she can hardly have any therapy session or something else planned.

– Room fifteen, right? I don't know, she is not there? Let me ask around a bit. Maybe she's in the dining room or something. As far as I know, she has not eaten anything all weekend. Maybe she went out to get a snack.

– It is absolutely impossible, she does not go anywhere on her own. Not eaten all weekend? What are you doing with her anyway? Go and find out where she is, my fellow man!

He came back after a few minutes.

– Apparently, she is out in the park with a friend or something. It was someone who saw her roll out along with a girl of the same age. Maybe you could go out and look for her there?

– This is completely unacceptable! You are responsible for her safety, and now you let her just be taken away by a stranger? Out in the park, perhaps? I have never heard its like! You can rest assured that there will be consequences of this!

She walked out of the building with quick, angry steps to look for her daughter. Cecilia sat of course as usual on a blanket under the tree in the park, chatting with Ashley. Suddenly, she saw her mother from a distance.

– Shit, there is my mom and she seems to be looking for me! We must have lost track of time!

– Take it easy and let me talk to her. You know I'm good at talking, so I will probably manage to calm her down. Now shut up because she seems to have spotted us, she is coming this way. Gosh, what she looks angry.

Phoebe came up to them and first looked at Cecilia, who had taken on her expressionless face again. Then she pointed to Ashley with a trembling finger.

You ... you ... your your scoundrel! Who are you to have the nerve to take my daughter out here to the dangerous park? You can rely on that my husband, Vance Hampton-Gallant, will make short work of you with the help of our lawyers. There is no excuse for this irresponsible behavior.

– Well, my name is Ashley and I...

– Do you really think I'm interested in who you are? For my, you are just an immature girl who is exposing my daughter to danger. What on Earth gives you the right to do that?

– Well, I promise you that I don't have...

– You just keep your mouth shut! I'm not interested in your pathetic excuses. What makes you think that you have the right to risk my daughter's well-being like this. Of all the miserable people I've met, then you are the most...

– MOM, SHUT UP!

Phoebe stopped abruptly, shocked both her daughter said something, and even more that she screamed at her. She looked at Cecilia with big eyes. Cecilia held out her arms toward her and then patted on the blanket beside her. Phoebe sat irresolute down beside her and Cecilia threw her arms around her and hugged her tightly. She was both surprised and deeply touched and hugged her back. It was long ago that she got such a hug from her daughter.

– Mom, you must stop yelling at Ashley. She is only one who understands me. Since I met her, I have started to feel a little better. I feel so terribly bad, Mom. You can not imagine how bad I feel! But with Ashley's help I'm starting to believe in life again. I'm starting to believe I can take care of myself in a wheelchair, Mom. Please stop yelling, I get so sad when you shout at Ashley who is so kind to me. She means so much to me, you know.

Cecilia cried against her mother's shoulder, but Phoebe was so happy that she had finally begun to talk again. She hugged her daughter and tears came to her eyes as well, though there were tears of joy.

– I have to get out of here, Mom. Ashley says that if I come back to school and learn to take care of my wheelchair then everything will be all right. It works for her, isn't it? She's accepting no help, and she can't even move her legs. I can move my legs, at least what's left of them, so it's even easier for me, don't you think, Mom? What do I have to do for you to let me come home? I'll do anything, Mom. Anything!

First Phoebe was speechless. Not only that her daughter started talking again for the first time in nearly three months, there was no stopping her now. It was as if all the stored up talking suddenly just billowed out.

– First, you need to start talking. Not just with me, you must talk in your therapy sessions. That way, Dr. Snyder can help you get over your depression.

– I will talk, Mom. I promise! I will talk to Michael. And Larry and Evelyn and everyone else. Oh, how I will talk! Can you just take me out from here next week? It is so hard in here, you don't understand that, Mom?

– If you just feel good all week, then we'll see on Friday what Mr. Graham and Dr. Snyder says.

– Thank you Mom. I love you. You shall see that I will be good!

Phoebe looked at Ashley over her daughter's shoulder and shaped the word "thank you" with her lips. Ashley smiled back. Then Phoebe remembered that Cecilia had not eaten all weekend.

– But, darling, are not you hungry? They said you were not eaten all weekend.

– I have eaten, mother. Ashley called a pizzeria downtown that has door delivery, and came here with a giant pizza to us here in the park. See here the box. She's so cool, Mom, just ask for delivery to here like that. Yesterday she ordered food from a china place. It was strange food, but it was also good. We've been sitting out here all day today and yesterday and talked, enjoying the sun and eaten. It's a long time since I felt so good, Mom.

Phoebe was completely overwhelmed that Cecilia unexpectedly had become so talkative. She released her and looked at her face as if she had never seen it before. But she was still not really happy, as she turned to Ashley.

– Miss Ashley, I am extremely grateful to you for obviously getting my daughter to feel better. But I'm still not pleased that you brought her out here like this. None of the staff even knew that you were here. I only think about my daughter's safety, I hope you understand that.

– It is so typical for that department. I know from personal experience that they don't communicate with each other. They were very well aware that I was out here, but apparently not everyone knew about it. And I am absolutely convinced that if your daughter would unlikely get the idea to try to run away somewhere to make stupid mistakes, then I'm much faster than she anyway.

– Yes, properly. However, unexpected things can happen, after all, and you are, after all, a child. How could you be expected to deal with an emergency?

Ashley pulled out a small gadget that she had hanging around her neck.

– In that case, I would have pressed the alarm button here. An alarm had been sounded in the department and they would be able to track us with the help of the built-in GPS device. You need to understand, madam, that I am an employee of Jacob to take care of your daughter, and I take my work extremely seriously.

Cecilia's mother was surprised but nodded nonetheless pleased and thanked her again. Then she sat and talked a long time with her daughter before she finally went home again. For the first time in several months with a smile on his face.

~ ~ ~

The next day Vance, Phoebe and Michael gathered at Jacob's office. Micheal was proud to tell us that they have achieved a breakthrough with her. To his disappointment, it didn't come as a surprise to them, as Phoebe already talked to Cecilia. Anyway, they decided to have a follow-up meeting on the same Friday to discuss the week's progress. After the meeting, both parents went in to their daughter.

Cecilia sat up in bed and was about to play some game on her phone. When she saw her father, she put down the phone and looked anxiously at him. He could be very strict when she did not do as he wished. And now she had been bad for several months. But Vance just took her hands and smiled at her. She pulled him closer, and hugged him for the first time in several years.

– Father, I'm really sorry that I have been troublesome for so long. I know you are disappointed in me, but I promise to be better now.

– Cecilia, darling. I forbid you to blame yourself because you are depressed. You have been through a terrible trauma that no one should have to experience. It is not strange that you became depressed by it and certainly not your fault. Now I'm just happy that you finally seems to feel better.

– Thank you, Father. I actually feel better now. Ashley has really shown me that it is possible to manage in a wheelchair, and she is always so happy that she makes me happy too. But she also said that this place can not make me happy, but I have to return home and to school in order to feel good. She said I could come home this week if I am good.

– Well, now it is, after all, is not she who decides, but we are the ones in consultation with Dr. Snyder. But of course you should not have to stay here one day more than you need. We want nothing more than to take you home again.

– That's right, Phoebe said. We long for you both of us. Let us do as I said yesterday, we wait until Friday and then discuss with the doctor and Mr. Graham, if you are ready to be discharged.

Cecilia were satisfied with that answer. Every day, she got therapy with Micheal and she rolled herself to his office room in her wheelchair. She also ate by herself in the dining room and took care of all her needs by herself. Jacob and Micheal was marveled at how quickly it has gone from apathy to completely handling herself. Ashley continued to visit her after school every day, and they continued to sit in the park when the weather permitted it.

When Ashley came home from school on Thursday her mother told her that Jacob had called her and said that Cecilia's parents wanted her to call them. After some hesitation, she made the call. They asked if they could comer over that evening to meet Ashley. When the doorbell rang, it was Ashley who opened, a little worried, given that she got a scolding last time they met. Vance was startled when he saw her in the wheelchair. Judith came up to them and invited them into the living room where they all sat down. Both were impressed by how easily Ashley went around in her wheelchair. Ashley began to explain.

– There is one thing I have to explain before you say anything. I want you to know that no outsiders, including my mother here, knows who I met at Princeton House. I'm not allowed to tell her because of the confidentiality, but if you want to explain to my mom, it's up to you.

Vance nodded and started talking, it was clear that he was used to decide.

– We thank you very much both of you for being kind enough to receive us on such short notice. We will not waste your time for too long. I find no reason why not you, Mrs. Cox, should know about our daughter. Of course, we rely on your discretion. Our daughter, Cecilia, have lost much of her legs in a car accident and suffered a deep depression and we have therefore put her in Princeton House Behavioral Health, where she receives care.

– That explains a lot. My daughter was also admitted there because of her depression for her paralyzed legs. Now I finally understand why Jacob wanted to hire her as a therapist, although she has no education.

– To get to the point that is the first reason why we wanted to meet you, Miss Ashley, is to express our deepest gratitude for the miracle you have accomplished with our daughter Cecilia. For only one week ago, she was in such a deep depression that she was completely apathetic, and we saw no way out of it at all. Thanks to you, we are already discussing about her release, more on that in a moment.

– Well, I have not done much, just talked a little with her and shared with her from my own experiences.

– Then you must really be a terrific speaker, young lady, for this speedy recovery, I had never been able to predict. Either way, I want to submit a proof of our gratitude in the form of a check. I realize that it is quite an unimaginative gift, but it's the kind of gift I'm most familiar with. Before we came here I pondered on the amount I would write the check. First I wrote a million dollars on it.

He put a closed envelope on the table. Ashley winced and raised her hands deprecative.

– Then I thought that a million is a too insignificant sum. We value our daughter's life a lot more, so I was thinking of ten million but finally realized that there is no amount high enough to express our gratitude.

Ashley sat stunned and said nothing but was just shaking her head.

– Then I realized that you probably would never accept a check for such amount anyway, and then the gift would have become meaningless. So I was thinking of the maximum amount that you would accept and came to this amount. I really hope that you don't find it cheap.

Ashley opened the envelope after some hesitation and read the check. It was a check for $ 50 000. She immediately reacted by pushing the check back over the table.

– I'm sorry, but I can't accept it. You should know that I'm not doing this for money, nor for Jacob or anybody else in that suicide institute. I have not even done it for Cici actually, but for myself. When I was in her situation, depressed, suicidal and hopeless, I got help from an unexpected source of a person with a very big heart. So it has felt so so satisfying for me to give the same back to someone. These eleven days have probably been the most rewarding in my entire life. So thanks, but no thanks.

Vance had clearly not expected that answer. He had to make an effort to collect himself, it was obvious that he was used to getting what he wanted. Instead, it was Phoebe who tried.

– It's not that we pay you. We just want to give you a little pleasure in return. Surely you can think of something nice to do with this money? Maybe a vacation or a new computer? You would make us so happy if you accepted this, our small sign of gratitude.

Ashley looked at her mother.

– I think that you as well can accept the money. You did not want to have any of the damages compensation, but this is something that you deserved.

– Okay then, I would actually like to have a car that I can drive, so I thank you very much anyway.

Vance sighed with relief. Phoebe continued now.

– Another thing we'd like to raise with you is to ask for your advice. Cecilia wants most of all to come home already tomorrow and we want to hear your opinion about the wisdom of it, how likely is that she doesn't do anything stupid again.

– I'm not sure I want my daughter to have to answer that, Judith tabbed in. What if she gives a bad advice, and your daughter kills herself! Can you imagine any trauma it would be for Ashley?

– Well, the decision is entirely up to us. She should not feel that it would be her responsibility if we make the wrong decisions, we will listen to what everyone says

before we decide. But your daughter is probably the one that best understands how Cecilia is thinking right now, because they are so alike.

– Actually, we are totally different. We don't like the same music, clothes or anything else, and she is shy while I am outgoing. The wheelchairs does not define us, you see. But i guess that we have similar experiences, so maybe I understand a little how she feels. But I'm hardly objective because I hate that place.

– Just give us your best guess about what is best. We promise to take it for what it is, just a guess. She is healthy enough that we can take her home already?

– You mean how likely is that she kills herself, I guess. The problem is that I don't know.

She looked at her mother.

– I have to tell then Mom. I'm sorry.

Judith sighed but nodded anyway.

– Well, it's like this. When I was admitted there, my mother didn't think that I should come home, but I convinced Dad that I was feeling good so they took me home anyway. I nagged at him that I loved him and just needed his love and then everything would be fine and I seemed so happy. He believed in me and convinced my mom that I felt good again, so they let me come home and was convinced that I would feel better from it. But just an hour after I got home I cut myself again.

Phoebe gasped and put her hands to her face.

– When someone is suicidal then everything circulates around one's thoughts on how to take your own life, so you become a master at lying. So I don't know for sure if your daughter is trying to fool me as I did then, or if she really is feeling better.

– I understand very well that there is a possibility that she was not telling the truth. Mr. Graham has already warned us that there is an imminent risk that she's lying to get someplace where she can, indeed, make stupid mistakes. But what's your gut feeling? Shall we take her home tomorrow and then let her go back to school on Monday or not?

– Let me think a little. Well, yes, perhaps. She seems to be eager to get back to everyday life. She's not quiet about how bad she actually feels, which may mean that she was actually telling the truth. It should probably go well.

Phoebe sighed with relief.

– No, by the way, wait. Now I remembered one thing. I am convinced that if you take her home tomorrow, she is dead before Monday.

The pair jumped and Phoebe sobbed.

– What do you mean? Vance asked.

– Well, the first evening and the night after I got home was the hardest of them all. I felt so bad, was so worried about school that I almost could not cope with it. If I'd had another two days and two nights to ponder, no, I would not have managed that. If I were you, I'd wait to take her home until Monday, and then send her to school on Tuesday. Then, another thing that I feel I must do.

She looked at her mother.

– Mom, you know I have to do it. I know that my school work will suffer but I have no choice. You remember what Lisa did? I must do the same thing, right?

– You're right, you have no choice. I don't like it, but you got to. Just hope it does not becomes too long.

– What on earth are you talking about, the two of you? Vance wondered.

– Well, you can tell Cici that if she feels depressed then she should call me. Not only she can, she should do it. It doesn't matter at what time, day or night.

– Do you really mean it, Phoebe asked. Wouldn't it be bothersome if Cecilia would wake you up at night?

– She means it, Judith said with a firm voice. Your daughter will need the support in the same way that my daughter needed it before. I would rather allow Ashley to get a few bad nights' sleep than a guilty conscience for life for not having done enough.

The Hampton-Gallant pair thanked Ashley exuberant and went home again, satisfied with the meeting. Judith asked her daughter when the door ws closed:

– What's about this that you want to have a car, you haven't got any driver's license?

– Yet, that is.

Somehow, it was the happiest news for Judith since the attack. For the first time Ashley has shown that she had planned something in the future.

~ ~ ~

The next day all three Hampton-Gallants was gathered to talk with Jacob and Micheal. After Cecilia got to say that she wanted to go home now, then Micheal was explaining what they thought.

– We're not entirely convinced that Miss Cecilia is fully fit to be released yet although she is talking very openly about how she is feeling and has started to address her problems. She has surprisingly been very honest with that she does not feel so good, but still want to go home.

– Yes, it is Ashley who explained that I must be completely honest with everyone if I should be able to come home. That is why I tell you everything.

Jacob raised his eyebrows. It was not what he had thought Ashley would say to Cecilia.

– In any case, Michael continued, we think it would be good for her with a shorter leave. We therefore think that she should go home today, to be a few days at home and then return on Monday here for an evaluation.

– Jippiii Cecilia exclaimed. I can go home!!

– It is after all up to your parents, Jacob explained.

– Yes it is, Vance said. We have thought a lot about this and we have decided that you don't get to go home today, but shall remain here over the weekend. However, you can come home on Monday instead.

– Nooo, Cecilia howled. How can you be so mean! I'm calling to Ashley! She will explain to you that I don't need to be here.

Despite her parents' loud protests as she took up her phone and called Ashley. She turned on the speaker and put the phone on the table when Ashley answered.

– Ash, my parents are not letting me come home until Monday! I don't understand why, for the psychologist feel that I can go home today.

– I'm sorry, Cici, that's probably my fault. You know I never lied to you, and I will not start now. It is me who told them that you should not go home today. I know myself how difficult the first time is at home, and you would never make it until Monday. It would be best if you could get home on Sunday, but I know that the idiot Jacob does not allow releasing on the weekend because he believes that he's needed for that, and he is too lazy and disinterested to work weekends.

– You know that he is listening, huh?

– So what? He already knows what I think of him. But don't be sad, it's only two days and I'll come over both days. We can sit in the park again like last weekend.

– You will of course get paid also for these two days, Jacob interjected.

– Oh, that how it sounds now? I thought you said I would not get paid at all because I refused to report to you.

– It was probably just something I said in annoyance. I apologize for my outburst before, it was unprofessional. Of course, you will get paid according to the contract for all the days you've been here.

And so it was finally decided. Cecilia remained in the department over the weekend, but spent most of it outside in the park together with Ashley. She enjoyed her time with her, but Ashley thought it was getting boring, because she had almost nothing in common with Cecilia.

On Monday, Cecilia finally came home and was then driven to school by her mother the next day, because she's always been driven to school. She rolled with a lot of effort into the classroom and was embarrassed by all her classmates staring

at her. It then became increasingly worse during the day when many of them taunted and teased her because she had no feet any longer. Worst of all was that some of them even tried to lift her skirt to see how her legs looked.

It then continued throughout the school day with small viciousness and crude epithets. She became more and more sad by all who teased her. On the last break of the day, it was a tough boy from her class who called her "snobbish invalid" because of her fleet wheelchair. Then something snapped, and she started crying and rolled out from the school towards a railway bridge with tears running down her cheeks. Something made her still call to Ashley who was about to start her final class of the day. Ashley felt as if something cold was clutching her heart when Cecilia told her what happened and that she just wanted to kill herself.

– Now, you roll straight back to school, Cici! Do you hear what I say!?! I'm on my way to the bus now, and I'm coming to your school. Just go back and to to the class, I will talk to your classmates as soon as I can get there. Listen to me, Cici, this will be all right! I'll handle this!

Ashley had already come out to the street and down to the bus stop while she talked. The heart was pounding like a sledge hammer in her chest when she started looking for the right bus. She continued desperately to talk, and eventually managed to persuade Cecilia to return to school. After almost an hour then also was Ashley there just before the lesson was about to end and she knocked on the door of the classroom. After a short discussion with the teacher, she rolled in and sat there in front of the surprised class.

– Hi, I'm Ashley. I'm a bit of a friend of Cecilia here. She called me just a while ago and told me a little about her school day. Could I ask one of you for a small favor?

She pointed to a tough boy that she recognized from Cecilia's description as the one that had dropped the comment about the snobbish invalid.

– You there, for example. Can you run away to the handicraft room or kitchen and get a sharp knife? And then you take it and cut the jugular vein of Cecilia. It's positioned right here at the side of her neck. Then she will quickly bleed out in a humane manner. Can you do that for us, please?

– Are you crazy, bitch? Why would I want to kill her?

– I don't know why, I just know that you're already doing it. You know that she's already tried herself a few times, right? And has she not told you that she left the school during last break to kill herself because of what you and everyone else did? If you have to kill her, you better do it quickly and humanely rather than let her suffer too long!

It had become a dead silence in the classroom except for some of the girls who had started to sob. The only other sound was a guy back at a window laughing.

– What is funny about this? Ashley screamed to the guy at the window. Do you think I'm kidding, or what? This is bloody serious! And I mean bloody for real. You are fucking killing your classmate, and you have the nerve sitting there laughing!!

The guy at the window startled, became purple read and fell silent. All that was heard now was the girls sobbing.

– But we don't want her anything bad, really, one of the girls sobbed. We just tease her for fun.

– What's the fun of making someone else sad, can you explain that?

Now it was totally quiet in class. The atmosphere had really became tight, and no one even dared to move a feet. All winced when the school bell rang out, but none reacted. Ashley just sat there staring at them, one at a time. Nobody dared to really meet her eyes. Finally one of them dared to ask something.

– But what shall we do then? It's so hard to know how to treat someone who's in a wheelchair.

– That is exactly what's wrong with you and everyone else. You're focusing on the wheelchair. But the wheelchair doesn't define her, as little as it defines me. We use it because we have to. Can I ask you something? When I came in through the door, how many thought "look there, a girl in a wheelchair"? Raise your hands!

Almost every hand went up except one guy at the back with a tough look and wavy hair.

– You back there with the wavy hair. What were you thinking then?

– I thought that "there's a chick with a nice rack."

There were a couple of a bit reluctant laughter from the class, and Ashley smiled too.

– Well girls, especially those of you with hot bodies. Surly you think that it's annoying with guys who can not look you in your eye but is checking out your tits instead? Yet he is only he who got it, and the only one that made me a bit happy today. He didn't see the wheelchair, but he saw me. That he has a shitty attitude towards girls stinks, but it's still better than focusing on the wheelchair. So focus on the person sitting *in* the wheelchair, and treat her as if she do *not* have a wheelchair.

The class hummed in agreement.

– And when it comes to Cecilia, be a little extra kind at the same time. She has had it hard, don't make it worse. Think about how yourself would feel if you got your legs crushed in a car accident and got your bleeding, dying classmate in your lap without being able to do shit to even get loose. I hardly think that you would have laughed about it then. Do you think so?

The silence was deafening when the class tried to accept the picture of their classmate who was bleeding out in Cecilia's lap. No one felt particularly well from the pictures.

– So, what do you think now? How will you treat Cici in the future?

The whole class started talking and promised to stop teasing Cecilia.

– Listen to what they say, Cici! And watch the clock! The school day has ended for over ten minutes ago and no one has left yet. It is for your sake that they all remains, think about that! So everyone that agrees on helping Cici from now, raise your hand.

All raised their hands, including the tough guy and the teacher. Then she thanked Ashley and the class and explained that the school day was over. Cecilia

came up to Ashley and thanked her effusively. Several of her classmates came up to them and apologized, expressing their support for Cecilia.

Ashley felt quite pleased when she rolled home. Her mother was a bit angry, because the school had called and said that she skipped the last lesson. But when Ashley told her what she had done she calmed down and instead explained that she was proud of her. They both felt confident that Cecilia would be all right from now on. Ashley promised her mother to keep the contact to insure it.

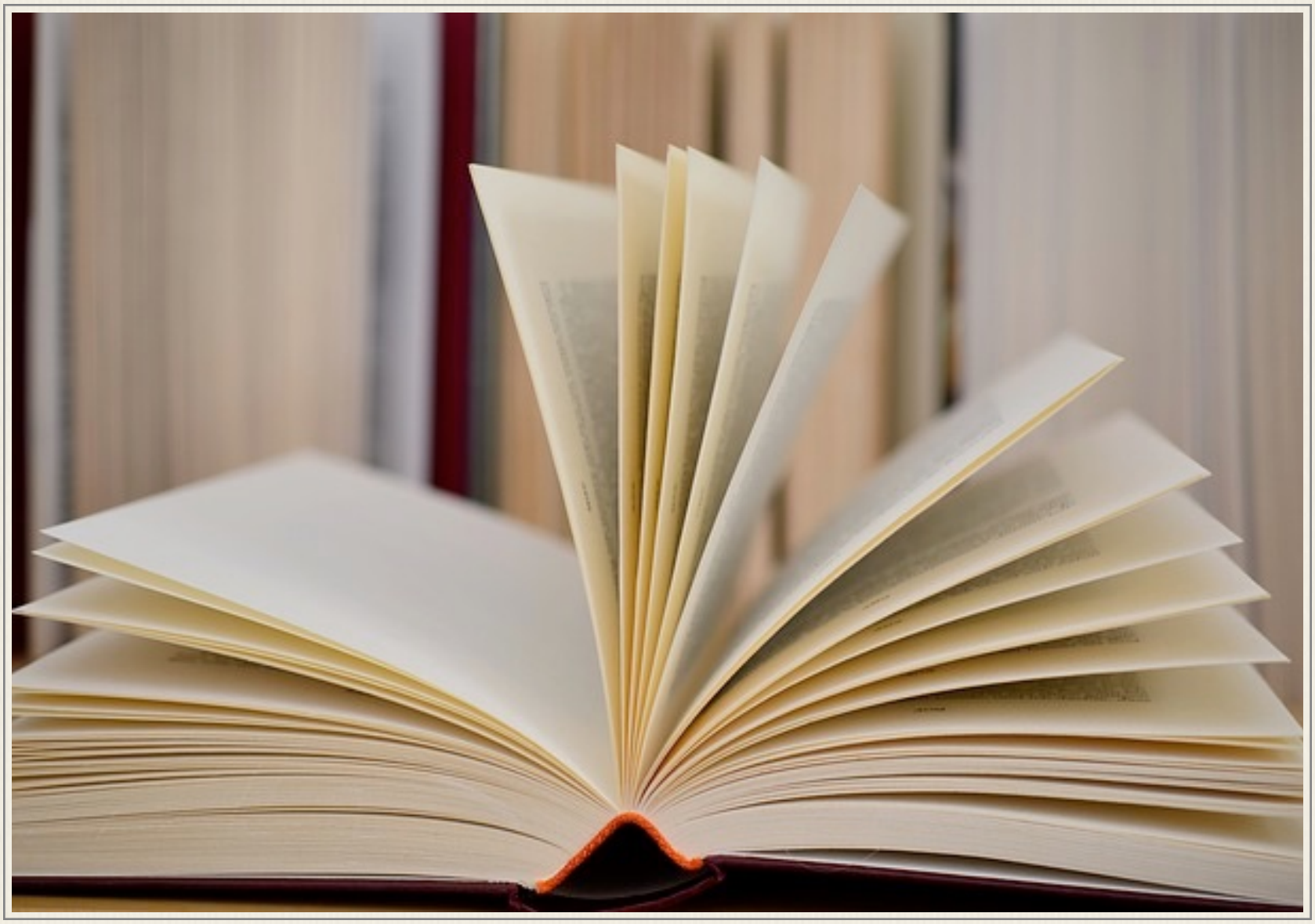
When was about sleep that night, Ashley was thinking on her grades. It had felt good when her mother had said she was proud of her. But how could she get her mother to be proud of the grades too, even though she was hopelessly behind in all subjects?

She brooded herself to sleep that night and soon the school would contact her mother.

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CHAPTER 10

# Grades pressure



Judith begun to work a little less now when the economy problems had been handled after she paid back all the loans that they had. She was more relaxed and gave Ashley more and more trust. But on this particular day, she was still a little worried, because the school had asked her to come there for a discussion about Ashley. She met her daughter who were waiting outside the staff room.

– Hello Darling. What's happening, is it a problem?

– No, nothing. Well, other then the usual, of course.

– Do you know why I've been called here?

– Don't know. Probably to discuss my school work.

Ashley rolled up to the door and rolled in without knocking. Judith followed, still worried. Inside the staff room several of Ashley's teacher sat down talking. When Eugenie saw them, she came up to them and gave her hand to Judith and welcomed her. Then they all sat down around a table.

– Thank you for coming here, Mrs. Cox, and thanks to you too, Ashley. We have asked you to come here so that we can discuss an action plan for Ashley for the rest of the semester. As you might know, she is hopelessly behind in her schoolwork.

– That's certainly true, but it's not her fault, Judith replied,

– Of course, we know that she can't be blamed for it, and we have no complaints at all on her commitment and work effort at present. The problem is that she has been absent for five months of the school year, completely valid absence, but still. We are also fully aware, Ashley, you have an extremely difficult time right now and that you are struggling with so many other things in addition to schoolwork. This is precisely the reason why we want to create an action plan that makes it easier for you so you don't have to feel so stressed here at the school.

– Do you have any suggestions for the content of an action plan for my daughter?

– We have discussed it internally and have a proposal. Ashley, you have of course fallen behind i all subjects. In some subjects, such as history, we are confident you can catch up. But in other topics that you are not as interested in, such as math, it may become difficult if not impossible to catch up. Sadly so say, it enough to fail in one subject to being forced to redo the whole school year. We believe, unfortunately, that there will be absolutely overwhelming for you to get approved in everything on the rather short time that is left of the semester.

– So what do you suggest then? Ashley said anxiously.

– We suggest that you spend the rest of the semester to sit in on all lessons but without taking part in the tests. In this way you avoid the stress and can be more committed to process all your other problems, that you may have. Then, next year you can start with new energy.

– You mean I have to redo the whole school year?

– Yes, but you should not see this as a failure, because it's not. There is no one that accuses you of anything that caused you to redo this year, as it's totally out of your control.

– Do you want to kill me or are you just stupid?

Eugenie was shocked by the answer and several of the teachers frowned. Judith wanted to sink through the floor of equal parts of shame and despair. Eugenie made an effort to control her voice not to sound angry.

– What do you mean, Ashley?

– Like, I feel so terribly bad right now. I just want to give up everything and kill myself. But I've promised my mother to give Life a chance anyway. The school is the only thing that keeps me going. If I don't have the schoolwork, then I will just start to brood. And when I brood, all the dark thoughts will come. Thoughts about that I don't have any future. I just want to die, actually. Your suggestions will almost certainly drive me to suicide. Again.

All around the table began to feel uncomfortable, especially Eugenie.

– It's terrible to hear you say something like this. Nobody here wants you to feel bad and certainly no one wants to make you feel worse. Can you explain to us what we at the school can do to help you feel better instead?

– Drench me with homework and assignments. Force me to work with my school work every second of my awakened time. Then I will not have time to brood and then maybe I...

Her voice failed her and it was obvious that she had to make an effort to collect herself and continue.

– Like, I just want to survive school and avoid to redo the year. Everyone in the class understand me and supports me, not only Amy. If I should have to change the class... I just don't know if I can handle it right now.

She paused and made an effort not to cry. Eugenie looked around at the other teachers who all looked sick. They began instead to discuss the possibilities for Ashley to actually pass all subjects, and started to believe that it might be possible anyhow. Finally it was decided that all teachers should produce assignments or tests for everything that Ashley had missed during her absence so that she gradually could get approved after all.

– You realize this plan will mean that you will not get any free time, just school work the rest of the school year?

– Sure, and I thank you for that. The more free time I can kill, the better.

– Given the circumstances, could you not find another word for it? The way you said it sounds terrible.

– Why should I? I have thought about death every day for the past five months, so sometimes it feels as if Death is my only friend.

– Please Ashley, don't say so, Judith sobbed.

– I don't want to upset you, Mom. But I have promised you to tell the truth. And this is the truth. Though I will of course give Life a chance anyway, as I have promised.

The action plan was documented and Judith received a copy to take home. She didn't like the plan, but Ashley seemed pleased so then she'd have to accept it and then support her instead.

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Now Ashley began to study as she had never done before. She was helped by Amy, although she didn't have to work too hard herself, but she gladly helped her best friend. As they was going to the same classes, they normally went together out of the classrooms. This day they were leaving school after the last lesson of the day.

– Amy, please, I need help with the geography again. What do you know about Canada?

– Gosh, it's almost a year since I read it. I've probably forgotten more than I remember from it. Let's go to the library and check.

– Shit, I got a bad feeling of deja vu right now. We will *not* pass the university. Just so you know. No way.

– Take it easy, we will not. I have not been able to go there myself, since you...

Amy fell silent and began to feel ill. She glanced at Ashley who seemed unmoved. But at the same time she rolled faster and faster toward the library's entrance. Amy knew her too well, and understood that she also felt sick by the memory. Ashley whizzed through the door while a guy was on his way out. He was surprised by the wheelchair and stepped aside not to trip over it. But he lost his footing and was desperately trying to regain it by grabbing a book stand that was placed at the entrance. That made it only worse because the book stand fell and he fell down flat on his back just in front of the feet of Amy, getting all the books on top of him. The girls froze, frightened at the mess. The guy could not help but start laughing about the whole mess as he was laying under all the books.

– Shit. This must be the worst first impression I've ever done on two beautiful girls like you two.

The two friends began to laugh at the humor in the situation. The guy pushed the book stand and the books aside and sat up. Ashley reached out her hand and helped him up. Amy looked anxiously at the guy and asked:

– How is it with you? Are you hurt or something?

– Pete. Well, that is my name, Pete. No, it's just my dignity that is damaged. Or rather crushed.

Amy giggled and Ashley looked suspiciously at her.

– Amy is my name. My friend here is named Ashley.

Ashley raised the book stand and Amy and Pete began to pick up the books. When Pete reached for the same book as Amy, their hands came in contact with

each other. She flinched but held her hand still while she looked at Pete under her bangs. He smiled at her, stood up while he held on to her hand and pulled her up. Ashley thought he held her hand far too long, but Amy didn't seem to mind.

– Amy, get a grip! You should help me with Canada.

– I know that. Roll over to the table there while I'm looking for some good books. Do you want to help me to search, Pete?

– I'll be happy to, he replied.

So while Ashley rolled up to a table Amy and Pete disappeared behind some shelves. After a suspiciously long time, they came back with some books about Canada. Ashley opened the books and started to read. Amy sat next to her and helped her to summarize the sides. Pete had also sat down, and leaned over Amy and pointed on important lines in the book. To Ashley's surprise, Amy seemed to like it when he kind of rubbed himself against her cheek. He had become quite talkative and tried to help. Though it was obvious that he had had his eyes on Amy who became increasingly unfocused as she more and more glanced at Pete.

Ashley made a face when she saw it, she realized what was about to happen. She felt annoyed by the whole situation and suddenly grabbed the book and left the table.

– I think I'll go over and lend me this book home instead. See you in the morning, Amy.

– You don't want some company to the bus?

– No, stay here with Pete. I'll be fine.

Ashley rolled away. She could not begrudge her best friend to hang out with someone else. It was not as if she herself was a particularly joyful company at present, she know that. At the same time the entire situation made her feel a little worse again.

The next few days she avoided Amy. But it didn't take many days until she began to miss her best friend again. So she started looking for Amy to get help with some schoolwork again. She could not find her and became increasingly irritated.

Before, they always used to hang together, but now it seemed impossible to even find her. Finally she found her friend in the grove behind the school where she sat cuddling with Pete.

– Hey Amy! I was looking for you. You did promised to hang with me at the library, studying a little every day after school, right?

– Sure, yeah. I just forgot it a bit. Come on, let's go! See you later, Pete.

She kissed Pete and Ashley grinned. They went together to the library and Amy helped her as usual, though she seemed more distracted than normally. Ashley saw that her eyes often wandered off with a dreamy look.

– No, you know what, Amy? I can probably handle this by myself now. You don't have to help me right now.

– Sure, Ash? You know I'm happy to help!

– I know you'd rather hang out with Pete. Just go back to him now. Your brain is still with him anyway.

– Are you mad at me because I have a boyfriend?

Ashley sighed deeply and looked away.

– It's true, huh. You are mad! It's so unfair!

Ashley was quiet for a moment before she turned her head back and answered.

– No, Amy. I'm not mad because you have a boyfriend and that you are happy with him. In fact, I'm happy for you. For sure! It's just that I realize that I will never get a guy myself.

– Of course you will! It just happened to be me that was ahead of you with something for once.

– Not at all. It was me that Pete stumbled over and it was me that he saw first. But still it was you as he became interested in. I understand him, I'm sitting in a damn wheelchair. No guy will ever want to check me out.

– Don't think like that. You are absolutely a fantastic person, and soon some guy will notice it, and then you are also hooked up.

– Blah, blah, yeah, sure. The inside is more important than the outside. I have heard that shit before. But if no one even wants to throw a first glance at my outside, the the inside doesn't matter. We have always been together and met a lot of guys. But It's only you who they have looked at, never me. I understand that it's not your fault, because who want to date a cripple?

– If you would unbutton the blouse a bit then maybe the guys would be more interested.

– Come on, it's not that kind of interest I want to have. No, I just take these books and goes home. Just go back to Pete now. It's OK. I promise!

Amy looked long after her friend when she rolled away. She felt a bit of conscience. But anyway. It was not her fault that Pete had chosen her instead of Ashley. Still she felt uneasy for her friend and didn't feel like hanging out with Pete anymore, so she began to walk slowly toward the bus to get home.

Ashley had already caught her bus when Amy arrived at the bus station. She was annoyed with Pete because he was taking Amy from her. Irritated at Amy because she no longer seemed so interested in helping out. But most annoyed on the fact that Pete didn't seem the least bit interested in her. She cursed the wheelchair as she had done so many times before. Judith saw that she was in a bad mood when she came home and tried to get something out from her at supper.

– Is there a problem, darling?

– No, nothing new. Just the usual.

– What about Amy, by the way? She have always make you happier, but it seems that if you don't go with her as much as before. How is it that, is there a problem between the two of you?

– No, there is no problem. It's just that she's hanging out with Pete all the time, so I feel a bit in the way.

– Who's Pete?

– It's her boyfriend, I guess.

– What, has Amy got a boyfriend? That's nice for her, isn't it?

– Sure, sure. It's nice for her. She deserves to be happy after having saved my life three times. It's just that... Asch. Never mind.

– It's just what?

– Like, well. That she has a boyfriend reminds me that I probably will never find any guy who likes me. Who would throw so much as an extra glance at me, sitting in a wheelchair?

– Don't say that, darling. There is surely someone out there for you too. I'm absolutely convinced that you will find him. It's just that Amy managed to be first for once. Normally you're the first of the two of you, is not it?

– Well, it used to be so. Today I don't know.

– Little darling. You look great too. You're Better looking than Amy, in my opinion. You should never forget that. Appearance is more than a wheelchair. And considering all the weight training you are doing right now, you will soon become the prettiest girl in the class.

– Thanks, Mom. At least you try. Maybe you are right. But now I don't have time for this, I have to be ready for an extra report that my teacher gave me tomorrow to prove that I've learnt the geography from past semester.

Ashley thanked for the food, took her books from the library and rolled into her room again. Judith cleared the table and washed the dishes while she pondered. This thing with Amy's boyfriend could actually put Ashley down. After the dishes, she sat on the couch and watched a TV show and fell asleep. She awoke with a start and looked at the clock. It was just past midnight. She realized that Ashley hadn't come out of her room to say "good night" What had happened to Ashley, why had not she come out?

Filled with worry she hurried into Ashley's room with bad feelings. She found her sleeping in bed with her books next to her in bed. The poor girl had apparently fallen asleep from all studying.

Judith collected the books and put them into the school bag. Then she put the blanket over Ashley, turned off the light and went out. Ashley winced and opened her eyes.

– What, who is it?

– It's just me, darling. You fell asleep away from your books. Good night.

– Oh, yeah. Good night Mom. I love you!

– Love you too, little friend. Sleep now!

Ashley went back to sleep and slept heavy all night.

Judith wondered how it was with Lisa now. "I wonder if Ashley is still calling to her," she thought.

The truth was that Lisa was almost missing the daily conversations. Instead, it was Lisa who used to phone a couple of times a week to hear how things were. Ashley always became happy, because it made her feel that Lisa really still cared about her.

The weeks quickly passed. The only thing she did when she was not in school was to study and continue her weight lifting to gain more arm strength. She became almost manic in her training because she partly saw it as her chance to be able to live in a wheelchair and partly as a way to keep her figure, despite the lack of exercise. Moreover, it was only when she trained as she didn't study and she really felt good when training, almost like an addiction. The semester and the school year was drawing to an end and it seemed that Ashley would actually manage to get approved in all subjects. But one day her math teacher wanted to have a word with her after school.

– Ashley, I've seen how you've struggled with math ever since you came back from the hospital. Therefore I don't like to have to say that unfortunately it will not be enough, but I have to give you an F in math.

– But then I had to redo the whole year! It would be a disaster! Can't you give me a break?

– It might be good if you would redo the Junior year anyway, so you get some peace and calm and get a chance to read everything you missed without rushing you to death. Mathematics has probably always been your worst subject, isn't it?

– Don't you understand that peace and calm *are* the death for me, because then I start pondering again? No, of course, yes. You were not at the meeting a few months ago. I just have to get approved in everything, otherwise I totally crashes. It's probably only in math that I will fail. Is there anything I can do? It's not my fault! I'll do anything!

Ashley didn't want to show how sad she was, and tried to hide the tears in her eyes. But the teacher saw them anyway and relented.

– Actually, I can't make any exceptions, It's your knowledge that should be counted, and nothing else. But I agree that your case is extreme so... Well, we could say this. If you study during the summer and then do a test for me before the summer is over, I will break the rules and give you an E anyhow.

– Thanks. O thank you very much. I promise to study all summer. You should not have to be disappointed in me.

– I hope so. But you must understand that if you don't pass my test, I will reject you in Senior year regardless of how good you are then. So it's important that you really catch up during the summer.

– Of course. I will to that.

The teacher left Ashley with some unease. This was totally against the rules! He dreaded what would happen if she failed test but then did well throughout the next year. How could he reject her? No, this just have to work, because he felt truly pity for Ashley.

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Ashley was sitting at the bus stop on the way home and read her grade paper that she just got in her hand. My God, her mom would become mad when she saw it! The best grade was in history where she received a D, otherwise it was just E all the way. The only small consolation was that she hadn't got any F, thanks

partly to the math teacher. She would at least not have to redo the year. But the grades really sucked, much worse than last year, when they already were bad. “I promised my father that I would improve my grade in Junior,” she thought. The bus seemed to be late so she continued to brood. It felt like yesterday when she had experienced the same thing, to come home with bad grades. Yet it was almost exactly one year ago. She would never forget that day.

It was of course before she ended up in a wheelchair so she had walked through the door and met her mother in the kitchen, waiting. Judith held out her hand and wanted to see her grades. Ashley didn’t want to show it, but had no choice. When Judith saw how bad it has become then she became furious. She yelled so loudly to her daughter so that Joel came running. Ashley was relieved, as he had always defended her against her mother. Judith left the grades to Joel with a frown.

– Look, do you think this is acceptable? Her grades last year was pretty bad, but this is even worse. She just runs around downtown and enjoying herself instead of focusing on school.

Joel lifted one hand to get Judith to be quiet while he was reading grade.

– Judith, darling, can you leave the kitchen? I have to talk to Ashley alone.

– You surely can’t defend her again that you usually does, Judith began. This is surely too much...

– Please, just go, he interrupted. I’ll take care of this.

Judith glared at Joel who for once, met her with a look that left no room for any protests. She left the kitchen and envisioned that it would probably be time later to yell at Ashley. Joel looked sadly at his daughter with the grades in his hand. For a long time he sat still and just stared at her while she squirmed in discomfort. He seemed so serious, and she started to get worried.

– Ashley, is this how you thank me for always defending you? I don’t know how many times I’ve been taking shit from your mother because you are making stupid things and I’m defending you. How can you do this to me? You can’t say that you

have received this grades because you're too stupid to learn, because I know that is not true. It feels like you don't care about school. Why?

– Please, Daddy, you know I do my best.

– If this is your best, you are not my daughter. Don't stand here and lie to me! I didn't think that about you; that you would stand here and lie me straight in my face. To your mother, yes, but not to me. Well? Why?

Ashley had never heard her father talk like this before. She had always had a good relationship with him.

– Please, Dad. I'm not lying ... or ... maybe... I don't know...

She started crying, heartbroken by his hard face. He was on the verge of melting, but was too angry to give in.

– You must surely know why? If you have trouble with homework, you can always come to me, you know that.

– Like, I ma... may have not been taking it seriously. Amy is so talented and she, like, don't need to study, so I might have gone a bit much with her...

– You can't possibly be serious in that it's Amy's fault that you are not studying? She is so good at school, it should surely rather be the other way around?

– She doesn't study herself...

– That's the worst excuse I have ever heard! Actually it sounds like you don't appreciate all I have done for you! You have made me so disappointed today!

Joel continued to complain to Ashley for several minutes, but so quietly that she barely heard him. It made it far more painful than when her mother stood there screaming. Judith was standing outside, but she didn't hear anything. Eventually, Joel calmed down when Ashley promised her heart out that her rating in Junior would be much better than this.

– The only thing that I demand is that you do your best in school. Don't I have the right to demand that?

Ashley nodded, and finally was allowed to leave the kitchen. She ran past her mother crying her heart out and ran into her room, where she threw herself on her bed, shaking from the sobbing. Judith looked surprised at Joel and followed Ashley into her room.

– Are you also going to yell at me now, Mom? she sobbed.

Judith didn't have the heart to continue complaining. She had never seen her daughter be this upset before.

– No, darling, I will not. You know that both me and your dad just wants your best. Don't cry now, it will certainly be better next semester.

She put her arms around her daughter and hugged her. Ashley calmed down but promised herself to never, ever make her father disappointed again.

~ ~ ~

Ashley woke up out from her memories when the bus came. Gosh, that was the only time she was reprimanded like that by her father. And that her mother would be the one who comfort her, that had never happened before! She rolled onto the bus, sick with worries. Dad was away so he would not yell at her this time. But just the fact that he was gone made it worse, because she had betrayed her promise to him.

When she rolled through the door her mother was already waiting in the hallway. With some hesitation, she gave her the grades and waited for the reaction. Judith read through the paper, then nodded just slightly and gave the paper back to Ashley who looked uncertainly at her without really daring to meet her eyes.

– Mom, I'm sorry for that the grades are not better. I promised you...

– Relax, darling. I'm pleased that you have passed. My God, you've missed almost the entire school year and moreover felt so bad. It's a pure miracle that you don't have to redo the year. I'm so proud of you!

– Well, I have to admit one thing. I was actually failing in mathematics, but the teacher gave me a chance to study during the summer to avoid going on the whole year. I promise to study all summer, both day and night.

– You have to get enough sleep, otherwise you can't manage it. Tell me if you need help with studying. I'm trusting you!

Ashley was almost shocked that her mother didn't yell again. Though it was not she that had not yelled last year either, it was her father who had done it. And he had not seen the grades yet. He would certainly have been disappointed again. "I wonder where he is? Is he even alive?", she thought. She rolled into her room and took out school books, even though she was sick and tired of always studying. But if her father looked down on her from heaven, she just have to make him proud. She have to!

The summer passed and Ashley continued with schoolwork almost every day. Amy mostly hanged out with Pete but also took the time to hang out with Ashley, because she understood that her depression was not over yet by a long shoot. Lisa realized it too so she invited her down to her place. Ashley took the train down to Lisa and was there a few weeks. It was wonderful to be there. Lisa lived on a farm and had a couple of riding horses. They rode around on her property nearly every day. When she sat on the horse's back, she felt so agile that she almost forgot that she was paralyzed.

Lisa also felt good to see how Ashley got alive again. She had been a little worried that she would not stand the quiet country life, but it showed up that she enjoyed it to the fullest. She helped willingly to take care of the animals and the garden. The only problem was that it ended too soon, because Lisa was about to record a new album.

When Ashley came home, she continued to study mathematics. She also studied in advance most other subjects in order to get better final grades. As before, this meant that she had no time to brood. To read was of course not a problem to do sitting in a wheelchair. She also took the opportunity to take a driver's license to be able to drive her small handicap equipped car that her mother had bought to her with the money from Cecilia's parents. Judith had some mixed feelings when Ashley began to drive around on her own. It was so wonderful that she had become more free to move around, and it was obvious that it was making wonders

for her. But at the same time she was away from home more often, and Judith could not shake off the feeling that the problems were not over yet. Not entirely.

When the summer vacation was almost over Ashley would celebrate her birthday. Judith decided that Ashley needed cheering up, so she went on with enthusiasm in order to plan a party for her.

The day of the party, it was excellent sunshine and many of her classmates came to congratulate. Ashley seemed really happy about the presents, the good food and getting to hang out with something else than the books for a day. But Judith felt as if happiness were just sitting on the surface. Or was it just her own imagination because of her constant worries?

When everyone had gone home after the party, Ashley thanked her mother and rolled into her room. Judith cleaned up and washed everything and then went to her room as usual to say goodnight. She stopped outside the closed door and listened. Ashley sobbed loudly and sounded quite heartbroken. Judith knocked on the door, waited a few seconds and then went inside. Ashley had collected herself with an effort and smiled at her mother.

– Thanks for the party, Mom. It was really fun.

– Are you sure? You don't look so happy.

– Oh, it's nothing. I just remembered some old stuff. Everything is super. I promise! Good night, Mom.

– Goodnight darling. You know I love you, right?

Judith smiled with her whole face while she closed the door behind herself but then she dropped the smile. It was obvious that something was wrong and that Ashley didn't want to talk about it. She sighed and began to feel uneasy again that Ashley would become depressed again. She really hoped that it would go over when she came back to school again and got to hang out with Amy daily. Though Amy apparently mostly was together with her boyfriend you, so maybe it would not help either.

A few weeks after the birthday, she went to the school to do do her math test as promised. It's difficult to say who was the most nervous, she or teacher. He was nervous about what he would do if she failed the test. But none of them had needed to be worried, as she pass the test with a quite a big margin.

The little that was left of the summer, she devoted herself to brood and to sit in front of her computer.



CHAPTER 11

# Daddy



A couple of weeks into the semester, Ashley felt that it was about time. She had hesitated a long time before she had finally gathered enough courage and brought up the delicate topic an evening. She and her mother sat in front of the TV and watched a movie together.

– Mom, that's one thing I wanted to talk with you about for a long time. There is still one thing that bothers me. Yes, more than bothers me. Somehow it feels like

something is missing me, something that hurts so much that I find it difficult to live with it. I know you will not like to hear this, but please don't be angry. You must understand that this is a big thing for me, and I can't manage to keep it inside of me anymore.

Judith turned cold and had to make an effort to control her voice. She had been waiting for this since the birthday party.

– Take it easy, I will not be angry. What is it about?

– I want to meet Dad again. It's not that I think that we can't make it by ourselves, but I still misses a father. Although, you have a kind of boyfriend already, he will never be my dad, and you know it.

Judith got a lump in her stomach but controlled her emotions.

– Was that the reason why you were so sad on your birthday?

– That's right. You'd worked so hard that it would be nice, but all I could think was that it was my first birthday without Dad. I missed him so much that it hurt. I need him too, Mom. Can you understand that?

– I understand, but the problem is I don't know where he is, he just disappeared without leaving a new address or phone number. The only thing he left was a kind of farewell letter, it sounded almost as if he was going to kill himself. Well, you have read the letter yourself. So I don't even know if he's still alive.

– He didn't kill himself, and I know where he lives. Did some research with my contacts on Facebook. He lives in a small village called Elizabethville about 160 miles west. I intend to visit him on Saturday, whether you like it or not. But I would of course prefer if you would allow me.

First Judith became angry that Ashley actually had been looking for Joel without saying anything. Her first thought was to prohibit Ashley to go there, but she stopped herself when she realized that this was important to her.

– I don't like that you go there. Not at all. He has not earned the right to meet you. At the same time, I understand that you miss him, in spite of all he's done. He is still your father and he and you have always had a close relationship. Of

course, you can go there if you really want to. I'm just hope you don't expect me to come along, because I'm still just so mad at him.

– I already understand that. But I can't be mad at him.

– Have you already contacted him so he knows you will come?

– No, I want it to be a surprise. I don't want him to get the chance to leave again until I talked seriously to him.

– I almost feel sorry for him. But just almost. It's hard to forgive that he just abandoned us when we needed him the most, and then not even call to see how we feel. That he ignored how I feel it's bad, but that he ignores you is completely unforgivable.

– He may have his reasons. That's partly why I have to see him again, and that it should be a surprise.

– Yeah yeah. I'm totally against it, but if it's so important to you, then I will not forbid you. How will you get there?

– The buses go there too seldom, so I plan to drive there in my car.

– Sure, just drive carefully. And promise that you will send a message when you arrives so I know that all is well. Keep me informed how it goes, promise me that!

– I promise! Thanks Mom for understanding! I'll leave on Saturday morning.

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She sat, hesitating, for a long time before she finally rang the doorbell. What if he didn't want to meet her? But now there was no turning back, it would be stupid to just go all the way back home again after all those hours on the road. Then finally Joel opened the door and was first confused until he lowered his eyes and saw Ashley. He swayed by surprise, turned pale and looked as if he would faint. But Ashley smiled brightly at him and held out her arms.

– Are you not going to give me a hug at least, after all these months?

He bent down and hugged her long and hard. Tears started streaming down his cheeks and he would not let her go. Finally Ashley said:

– You can release me now, Dad. Are not you going to invite me in?

– Yes, yes, of course. Come in. Oh my God, it's you. It's really you.

Joel looked worried behind Ashley but soon understood that she had came alone, to his surprise. He held the door and Ashley rolled inside.

– Where... uh... where is your mother? Is she not with you?

– Don't worry, Dad. I'm all alone. By the way, I promised to text her.

She grabbed her phone and texted "I'm here and inside now" to her mother. Then she followed her father inside. Joel showed her into the living room and held out a chair for her. Then he suddenly became red in his face when he remembered she was already sitting down. But she just smiled at him and moved away the chair and rolled up beside it. Joel sat down beside her and didn't know what to say so Ashley started instead. She didn't want to make her father sad so she avoided saying everything about how she felt.

– You don't need to worry about me anymore, Dad. I've like got over most of my depression now and have begun to live my life again. Also, I have become much stronger as a person now after everything that happened. But Dad, I really hope you can forgive me!

– What do you mean?

Joel looked genuinely surprised. He was also still in a kind of shock that she had come.

– You know what I mean. I lied to you and used your love and then betrayed you. Everything I said was lies so you would convince Mom to take me home where I could kill myself.

Ashley could not control her tears anymore.

– It was terrible what I did you to, I deliberately abused your trust to try to kill myself like that. I even caused that you and Mom broke up. I don't know if I will ever forgive myself for it, but I still really hope you can forgive me.

– Oh my God, beloved child. You don't have to ask for forgiveness. You were so depressed that you were not yourself. It was not you who lied to me, it was your disease. And as for your mother and me, well we had problems even before you were injured, and it's very possible that we had separated anyway.

– Do you really mean it, Dad?

– With all my heart. I never accused you of what happened. Never!

– Thank you Dad. I love you so much and I miss you.

– I miss you too. It's just...

Joel sighed and fell silent. Ashley recognized it so well, he had always found it difficult to talk about feelings, just as herself. They understood each other anyway, so it was not necessary that he said anything. But she had one more thing that was bothering her.

– There is one more thing, Dad. I have failed you in another way, too. I have betrayed a promise to you, an important promise, as well. This has really tortured me...

She began to sob again and he put his arm around her as consolation. He was not used to such emotional outbursts and didn't quite know what to say.

– What is it? It can't be that important now?

– Well, I promised you that my grades in Junior would be better than in Sophomore. But they were really bad, I got E in all subjects except one. And I really promised you that it would become better.

– Oh my God, darling. Don't bother about that! You could not imagine that something like this horrible thing would happen to you when you gave your promise. Your grades are the least concern you should have right now, believe me.

– It's important to me. I felt so bad that I let you down. But I promise that the final grades in Senior will become better. Yes, much better than every other year. Scouts honor, Dad!

– All I've ever asked from you is that you do your best. Now, you must first learn to live in a wheelchair, and feel good. Then you can focus on your grades.

– Really, Dad? You're not disappointed?

– Not at all! On the contrary. You said you managed to pass in all subjects, just that it's a achievement after your terrible experience. I'm just proud of you!

– Thank you Dad. I guess it feels a bit better now.

He hugged her again and she hugged him back. It felt so good to be able to hug her father again.

Then he heard a key in the door and then a woman with blond hair came through the door, apparently with her own key. She came into the living room and saw Ashley in the arms of her father and stopped and frowned her eyes. To Ashley's surprise Joel stood up and went up to her and gave her a kiss on her mouth.

– Sonja, this is my daughter Ashley who came to visit unexpectedly. Ashley, this is my... friend Sonja.

Ashley rolled up to her and extended her hand. Sonja looked really relieved when she took her hand.

– Hello to you, nice to meet you. Nice that Dad found a new girl who can keep him warm at night. No, ugh, that was not a nice thing to say. Excuse me for coming to visit here so unannounced.

– It... it's okay, Sonja said almost shyly. I already knew that Joel have a daughter, but I thought, well, he thought, ooh...

Ashley soon realized that Sonja was as insecure and emotional as her father. Perhaps equally scared of conflicts too.

– You mean that he thought I was dead, right? That I've killed myself? Just take it easy, I've gotten over my suicidal thoughts now.

– I'm really glad to hear that. I guess you two have a lot to talk about so I'll leave you alone. It's almost time for food, so I go into the kitchen and cook. Ara you planning to stay for lunch?

– Of course, if I'm allowed.

Sonja left them and went to the kitchen. Joel looked a little iffy on Ashley. He wondered if she really didn't bother with that he had another woman now. He didn't dare to ask it, but said instead:

– But tell me all about how you feel today instead!

The conversation flowed better when Ashley told him everything that happened, about Lisa and Amy and everything else without leave out the sad parts. Joel began to realize that she was right about becoming stronger as she could describe all the terrible things that happened to her in the same light tone as she told him about all the fun. Joel began to talk about his new life and soon they sat laughing and enjoyed each other's company. After a while Sonja called that the food was ready and Ashley followed him to the kitchen. Both Joel and Sonja were impressed by how smoothly she moved in the wheelchair.

After the meal Ashley helped with the dishes while Joel cleaned the table. Then they sat and talked about everything at the kitchen table while they ate ice cream as dessert.

– Dad, I'm just wondering one thing. I don't criticize or so, but I just wonder what actually happened when you left.

– Ugh, I don't even want to think about that day. But I guess I owe you an explanation. I felt so terribly bad because you felt so bad and you didn't want to li... live any longer. So when you tried again at home in the bathroom then something broke inside of me. Judith couldn't forgive me, but was nagging on me every day. She accused myself that you almost died, and I felt the same too. So, darling, I had decided to commit suicide, because I could not take it anymore.

– But obviously you didn't do it, which I'm grateful for.

– Even today I can't understand how you managed to take the leap, because I simply could not. I was standing on a bridge and was going to jump, but I didn't have the courage to do it. So finally, I returned back into the car and just drove and drove totally random until I crashed into a ditch because I was too upset and could not see the road anymore. The car was scrap, but I'd survived with only mi-

nor wounds. Sonja found me there in the ditch, helped me out of the car and took me home here to her place where she cleaned my wounds. Then she let me stay here with her for a while. One thing led to another, and...

– So cute, she was your knight in shining armor. I certainly understand that it must have been terrible for you, and I'm sorry for that. It's easy to understand why you could not cope anymore and took off, I had probably already guessed that. But it's another thing I don't understand.

– What is it, darling?

– I have wondered why you never tried to contact any of us since you left? Mom thought the whole time that you were dead, so when I told her that you were still alive, she was so angry at you because you have not called, or not even sent a letter. I'm not angry the way that she is, but I also wonder why.

– It has not been a single day that I didn't think about contacting you, but I simply didn't have the guts. Secondly, I was so afraid to talk to Judith, so I just could not call. Then also, you see, it was my fault that you almost died... I felt... that as long as I kept myself away you would have a chance. But not if I was there. It was better if I never got to meet you again than you are would take your... No, I could just not cope with that risk. Sure it's silly, but...

Ashley nodded and gave his dad a warm hug to make him understand that she actually was still alive. The atmosphere had become unpleasant so she suggested that they should go back to the living room again and soon they all three sat in front of the TV talking on like old friends while they watched. The hours passed and the conversation flowed more and more easier. Sonja also began to relax a little bit and they all joked with each other. Suddenly, Ashley remembered the time.

– Jeez, what late it have become! The time has just flown away. It's almost too late for me to go home now. Can I sleep over here tonight and go home tomorrow instead?

Joel looked at Sonja, who nodded.

– Sure you can, you're Joel's daughter. But are you sure it's okay for your mother? she asked.

– Oh yeah, Judith! I hope she knows you are here, Joel said.

– She didn't really like that I went here, but she still accepted it. I just have to text her that I'll sleep over.

Ashley sent a message to her mother. She soon got a response where Judith hoped she felt well and said "good night". Joel was relieved that he didn't have to make the contact homself. After a moment of silence, he asked after all:

– How is she anyway? I have not dared to call there as you know. And more importantly, how does it work between you now?

– All is well with her. We're doing well together, better than before. She actually has calmed down considerably. It works really well, you see. She has stopped yelling at me all the time and I can almost do what I want.

– Wow, it sounds like she really has changed. How can that be?

– Maybe she doesn't dare to put a lot of pressure on me anymore because she is afraid that I will kill myself. Or maybe she just got a lesson on what is important in life. In any case, we are not arguing with each other anymore.

– That sounds good that you don't argue with her as before. Uh... well... has she ever talked about me, or?

– Not much. Not much at all. She is, as I said, still very angry with you. You should actually get together sometime soon and talk like two adults. Like clearing the air between you so that you can at least be friends.

– Please, Ashley. I don't really think that I can do that. She'll only yell at me and accuse me for one thing or another. Not that she doesn't have reasons for that, but I don't really have the strength to deal with it anymore.

– It's so terribly hard for me when my parents can't even talk to each other, I love you both. When I celebrated my birthday last time, it was so insanely sad all day. Mom had really worked hard that I would have fun, but I could not help crying. It was undoubtedly my worst birthday ever.

– But why? Is it because you are sitting in a wheelchair?

– No, not at all. It was because you were not there. Mom's nice now, but I missed you so terribly. You just have to be reconciled so that you can at least be in the same room without arguing. Like, on my birthday, or graduation and such. You and Mom have, after all, one thing in common. One thing that I really hope that you both think is so important that you both can meet half way.

– What is it you think we have in common?

– Me. You have me in common. Right?

– She are actually right about that, said Sonja. Regardless what you think about your ex, you have a daughter together.

– Can't you come over next Saturday? For me? Please, I will persuade Mom to go along with it and tell her not to argue with you. It will be just fine, you'll see.

– You should actually do it, Joel, Sonja put in. You can bring your divorce papers so she can sign them. I don't want to be the third wheel anymore! Please?

Joel looked at Ashley when Sonja mentioned divorce and looked nervous.

– Well Ashley, I hope you will not be sad. But I don't think me and your mother can fix our marriage anymore.

– I'm too big to play the game if mother-father-child now. It's important to me now that you're happy and you and you and me have each other.

Joel and Sonja laughed happily ate the comment. Joel promised to talk to Judith if Ashley made her promise to take it easy. Then Sonja began fetch bed linen, pillow and blanket and made up the sofa.

~ ~ ~

Ashley drove home the following day and immediately began to process her mother make her accept to meet with Joel on next weekend. At first she refused to even talk about it, but she finally had to give in. Her daughter had become too strong and stubborn! Additionally, she came up with so wise arguments. Judith also realized that it might be an advantage for herself also that he came.

– Well, okay then, she replied at last. Though I will ask Jimmy to be here when Joel comes.

– Sure, no problem. Jimmy's your boyfriend and he has almost moved in already, as often as he is visiting.

When the doorbell rang the next Saturday Judith jumped high. She was not the least bit comfortable with meeting Joel again, it had been too much bad blood between them. But for Ashley's sake, she had put a effort into it. Ashley opened the door and smiled at her father.

– Welcome, Dad. Come in, come in!

Joel stepped in and hugged Ashley warmly. Then Judith came to the door. Joel was hesitant about what he would do as he extended his hand towards her.

– Aw, you should give each other a hug anyway. For me. Come on!

Judith shrugged and hugged Joel anyway. Jimmy came up to them.

– Hey Joel. This is Jimmy. He is actually my boyfriend. I hope you are okay with it, because that's just the way it is.

Joel shook Jimmy's hand warmly and almost seemed a little relieved. Then Ashley shoved both of her parents into the kitchen and said:

– Get in here now, both of you! And don't come out until you're friends again. Come on! And Mom, I want you to know that if you start to yell and scream, I will follow with Dad home. For good! Just so you know it!

Jimmy and Ashley sat in the living room and chatted while the couple discussed in the kitchen. Judith tried really hard to not raise her voice. Of course their daughter was right that she and Joel must be able to talk peacefully for their daughter's sake. After half an hour then they united with the other two in the living room. Judith sat down next to Jimmy on the couch while Joel sat alone in the other couch. Ashley rapidly slid down onto the sofa beside him, nestling in his arms.

– Well, what did you come up with now, she asked.

– We decided that you are going to stay with me on school days and with your dad on holidays. Though every other major holiday is mine anyway. And when you have an important day, we will try to be nice to each other to be together on your day. Weekends are for you to decide where you want to stay.

– Sounds good for me, she replied. What about the difficult question, then?

– What difficult question?

– You know? You two have always quarreled about me, what I can and what I can't do. Will you continue with that?

– No, we decided that if you are with your mother, it's her rules that apply while you are with me, it's my rules. None of us can complain about anything that the other has decided.

– Except for one thing. What one of us decides must not affect the other. For example if you want to get a tattoo that doesn't go away, so we must agree both.

– It sounds as if you both have matured and become wiser.

Joel and Judith could not help but laugh at the comment. It was as if their daughter was raising them instead of vice versa. Ashley dug in deeper into her father's left arm.

– This is life! Everything is as I wished. Now I've finally got my family back and everything feels just like it was before.

– Ashley, darling, Judith said softly. I really hope that you understand that your father is not going to move in here again, although we won't argue anymore.

– I get that. My family looks different now from before, but different is good. Nothing is static and everything changes all the time. The thing is to keep up with it and embrace all new things. The important thing is that I still have both my mom and my dad.

– We have promised to try to be friends now, for your sake. We shall never fight over you, and we will share your important days, like your graduation day.

– It sounds good. By the way, Dad, did Mom sign the divorce papers that Sonja wanted you to bring?

– No, she didn't.

– Why didn't you, Mom? I thought that was what you wanted.

– He signed my divorce papers instead.

Ashley laughed.

– There you go. You're still thinking the same way sometimes. Now you'll soon marry Jimmy and Dad can marry Sonja and then I have two fathers and two mothers. Could it be better?

Judith started and began to feel a little jealous. She tried hard, however, to not sound angry.

– Joel. Who is Sonja?

– Oops! Dad, have not you told about her? I'm sorry that I ratted you out, it was not my intention. Mom, Sonja's father's girlfriend. You can't complain, because you've got a boyfriend, right?

– I just wonder one thing, Joel. This time you must be completely honest. Did you know Sonja already before you left me?

– No I didn't. I told you about how I just drove the car that day and eventually ended up in the ditch, and that I got help. It was Sonja found me and helped me, and it was the first time I met her. In addition, we have only been a couple for a few months.

– So you can't complain really, Mom. Right?

– Well, I guess so. The whole situation is just so uncomfortable. But I guess we both have to get used to it.

Judith smiled and snuggled closer to Jimmy. It was incredible how mature and sensible Ashley had become, and how happy she seemed now. Joel also looked really happy where he sat hugging their daughter. Ashley could not stop talking, and the hours passed quickly. Suddenly Joel looked at the clock and jumped up.

– Shit, I've just missed the last bus home!

– I thought you had driven by car here, Dad.

– No, I crashed the car and Sonja needed her car. I guess I'll find a hotel somewhere.

– Mom, sure Dad can sleep here tonight?

Judith hesitated.

– You don't mean in the bedroom, I hope?

– Like, I'm not stupid, right? That's where Jimmy sleep now. Dad, surely the couch will do for you tonight?

– That would be great, darling.

Now it was Ashley who fetched beddings for her father and made up for him on the couch. Then everyone went to bed. Judith was so happy that Ashley seemed really happy and Joel apparently not just had accepted that she had found another, but also apparently had another himself now.

The day after they ate all breakfast together. Joel looked at the schedule and discovered to his despair that there were no buses at all on Sundays.

– Then you need a ride home, I guess. We can give you that, right?

– I was going to call Sonja and ask her to pick me up. Ashley, do you really think your mom or Jimmy will drive me all that way? I don't think we have become that good friends.

– No, probably not. I'll drive you instead!

Joel thought she was joking until they were going home and Ashley dragged herself onto the driver's seat of her car. He folded the wheelchair and put it in the back and stepped in beside her. She drove the car with such self confidence that he was amazed.

– Ashley, I'm really very sorry that I failed you and Mom like that. I regret it so terrible and don't understand how you could have forgiven me for it, because I can never forgive myself for that.

– I would rather like to thank you for it.

– Why? It was horrible of me to just run away like that.

– But it was because you had disappeared that Mom forced me into that awful rehab that you thought was too expensive, and it was there that Larry worked. Thanks to him I met Lisa when she made her speech and then came to care about me. She made me reach out to Amy again. It's thanks to them that I'm alive and whole today, and I'd never met her if I had not been in that place, and I'd never been to that place if you had not left. So you see how many bad things can actually lead to something good sometimes.

– When you see it that way, so...

– I've been thinking "if" so many times. If I had not bee walking that road on that day. If only I had stayed at the library for ten more minutes. If only I had listened to the doctors. If only I had not become depressed. There are so many "ifs". But it's not worth it to dwell on what might have happened "if". That was what almost killed me. In stead I'm thinking about what I have right now, today. I own so much more than what I'm missing, and what I have will give me a bright future.

Joel was impressed by her wise optimism. They sat and talked about everything and nothing the rest of the way. When they arrived, Joel seemed a little nervous. Ashley wondered if something was wrong.

– Well, I was just wondering how I should explain to Sofia that I slept over at my wife's place. Sofia is wonderful, but a bit too much jealous.

– Maybe you should have called last night.

– It had hardly been better.

– Take it easy, Dad! I'll explain to her.

Ashley rolled briskly up to the door and rang the doorbell. Joel did't get the time to open before Sofia arrived at the door. She wrinkled her eyes and looked a bit angry, as Ashley started talking immediately.

– Hello again, Sofia. Thanks for letting me borrow my dad this weekend. Sorry that he missed the last bus home, but it was just all my fault. I talked too much and

enjoyed so much being with him that we all forgot the time. But you can be calm, he had to sleep on the couch because my mom's boyfriend was in Dad's bed. Or rather ex-dad's bed, for now it's Jimmy. You're not mad at me, I hope?

Sofia was a bit of surprise at Ashley's rap comments. She felt that it was impossible to complain so she smiled at her and swore that she was not angry. Ashley said she was thirsty and asked if she could get a glass of water. Before Sophia could reply, Ashley swept into the kitchen, fetched a glass that she filled and drank. Then she chirped to her father:

– Can't you come and visit us on Thanksgiving? Bring Sofia with you, too! It would be great if you came. I will convince Mom about it. Then maybe I can spend Christmas here with you. Well, well you have to discuss it first. See ya!

She hugged her father, who promised to keep in touch, and then she jumped into the trunk of her car, dragged the wheelchair in with her and drove away while they both looked after her all dizzy.

– What energy and joy of life your daughter have! It's as if the wheelchair is not even there. She's an incredible girl!

Joel nodded. It was as if he could not believe it himself. He thought about she had said. Would he really be able to visit her on Thanksgiving, and other occasions? For his daughter's sake, he must find the strength to do it.

At the same time he knew his daughter too well, and knew instinctively that everything was not so good with her as she tried to suggest. He just hoped that she would deal with her problems and not give up, as he knew that he himself didn't have the strength to help her the way he should.

~ ~ ~

To Ashley's delight, both her parents accepted her proposal to try to socialize. So on Thanksgiving Joel came visiting along with large parts of the rest of their families. Even Sonja had agreed to join. It was a really nice party where both her mother and father were happy and joked a lot. Although the two didn't talk very much with each other, it didn't matter as everyone was friendly and nice.

When the food was served and everyone started eating then to everyone's surprise Ashley tapped her glass and said she had something to say.

– Like, I always used to get impatient with all who are giving speeches at Thanksgiving. I just wanted everyone to stop talking so I can feast on the delicious food, and now it's me who want to hold a speech, weird huh. This occasion is called "Thanksgiving" and that means is that you should feel thankful. Thankful! Many of you have said to me today said that you feel sorry for me and have tried to convince me that I should feel thankful in spite of what happened to me. So now I want to tell you what I think about thankfulness today!

Judith got quite worried by her words. What was her daughter up to? She hoped that she wouldn't destroy the whole pleasant atmosphere with bitterness.

– First, I'm thankful that I'm here today. Last year's Thanksgiving was certainly not the best one, I have heard. Mom sat crying in the kitchen, Dad was gone and I lay crying on a psychiatric institution. But here I'm today, and my father is also here. I guess that you know that they are in divorce? So I guess I become a children of divorce now. It sucks actually, all I would like my father move in here again and that Mom and Dad love each other as before.

Judith and Joel began to squirm by unpleasantness.

– I also would like to be able to walk, look like a movie star and live like a princess in a castle. But that will also not happen, and my life is different now. And different is good, you know! Imagine if all were the same all the time, how boring it would be. Instead, I got a new father and new mother instead. Jimmy and Sonja! So now I have four parents who love me, each in their own way. That's something to be thankful for, isn't it? And Mom and Dad is friendly with each others, just that is thankfully, right?

Now Judith smiled at Jimmy and Joel hugged Sonja.

– Then I'm going to spend Christmas with Dad and Sonja, and I'm also thankful for that. Imagine being able to experience a different Christmas for a change! Mom is not sad either, Jimmy is taking her on a romantic trip to the Bahamas, where they only need to take care of each other. Thank you, Jimmy!

Jimmy smiled and gave Judith a kiss to her great embarrassment.

– Then I'm sitting in a wheelchair, too, and it's really something to be thankful for! I have never received as much attention as now. There's always a seat on the bus for me, not even the principal of the school dare to offend me and I just need to wave my finger, then all comes running to help me. Really thankful and good consequence from sitting in a wheelchair.

Now she suddenly changed to a serious facial expression as she dropped the bomb.

– Then about this with my suicide attempts.

She took a dramatic pause and everyone around the table got a bit tense.

– Don't think that I regret them, because I don't. Just the fact that I wanted to kill myself and been so close to Death so many times, has made me appreciate Life so much more. So today I enjoy every day, for I know that tomorrow could be my last day. Not from my own actions, but we don't know what the next day will bring, do we? So, I live each day as if It's my last and I feel happy every single day. So yes, I'm thankful for everything that happened to me, and everything I have today. Thank you all for being here and trying to comfort me, even though that's the last thing I need.

All applauded to her spontaneous speech and the mood rose even more. Little did they understand that her speech was more directed at herself, because she actually didn't feel neither thankful nor happy. But she was tired of her friends and family constantly trying to comfort her with what she thought was senseless comments. Then she really wanted to believe that she some day in the future could actually be happy. Therefore, she sat there and tried to look happy. Maybe she would feel better if she pretended to feel good?

Christmas together with her father and Sonja were also really nice. Sonja's family came to visit and got to meet Ashley for the first time. Admittedly there was a small part of her that missed previous Christmases, but she shook it off. The same was the feeling of Judith when she lay sunbathing on a beach at Nassau Par-

adise Island with Jimmy. But then she looked at him and felt that life has been wonderful after all.

When school started again after the Christmas break, Ashley continued to work very hard with her schoolwork. Now she would work one hundred percent on her grades. With only one semester left is was urgent if she wanted to have top grades in all subjects! The intensive school work caused her to completely forget about her depression, and she had no thought of what would happen when high school was over.

~ ~ ~

The phone of Lisa rang and she became a bit worried when she saw that it was Ashley who called. She didn't use to call anymore so Lisa thought it must be that something serious has happened when she answered.

– Hello, Ashley! Long time no hear. Is there a problem, or?

– Not at all, everything is fine with me. Lisa, I would actually be happy if you came to my graduation ceremony. You don't have to come, but I hope that I'll get some kind of award because I worked so hard, and want to share that happiness with you too. Both my parents are are coming, so with you it would be complete happiness for me.

– Sure, I want to share that moment with you, just hope it doesn't get too boring. I'm not too fond of such events, as you know.

– The principal will make a speech, so that will probably be boring. Then several will sing on stage, too, and that's what I'm looking forward to.

– Are you going to sing too?

– Well, don't think so. Carl, the presenter of the whole ceremony is on me all the time, but I have not said "yes" yet.

– Just do it. It will be fun. You can sing that song you wrote by yourself with my melody. I can bring some musicians who can help you. What would you say if you and I sing a few songs together, too? I think it can be really fun.

– Hey, you are not supposed to sing! That's not why I invited you. Not a chance that I will ask you to sing too.

– Then don't ask me. I'll ask you if I can sing at your graduation. You know that I love to sing? It would be so fun to sing at your graduation, especially if it will be together with you.

Ashley still hesitated a lot, but Lisa persuaded her. So next day Ashley went to Carl and said she would sing, but only if she could be the last one to sing. She didn't say anything about that Lisa planned to sing too.

~ ~ ~

Judith, Joel and Lisa sat in the audience in the school gym. Lisa wore a giant hat to avoid being recognized. She knew she was popular in this school and didn't want to take any attention away from Ashley and the other students. All the students sat on mattresses in the middle of the room, even Ashley who had her wheelchair standing beside her. Then it was time for the principal to hand out rewards from the temporary stage. He started to give scholarships to all those who had got A in every subject. When he called up all the names except one then he made an dramatic pause while looking out over the audience.

– The last person who received the top grade of A in all subjects is a name that arouses amazement. I don't know how you managed to get an A even in sports, but you did it. Came on stage, Ashley.

Ashley cheered and climbed into the wheelchair and entered the scene quickly on the ramp that the caretaker had built. She took the envelope and the medal and turned her face the audience. Her parents looked almost shocked. They began to applaud and the rest joined in. The ovations became so deafening that she was almost embarrassed. Then she and the others returned to their places while the principal handed out the prizes to the student council.

– The next price that we always hand out is to the greatest improvements. Thus, it to the one who raised their graded most since the first year in high school. Welcome onto the scene again, Ashley!

She was surprised but had to roll up on stage again and receive another medal and envelope.

– Finally, we have this year's pupil. This one is nominated by you students from all classes, the one that you think is the best. And then we are not primarily thinking on grades, but instead characteristics as kindness, friendship, and simply being a good example for everyone else at the school. For the first time in school history, all classes have nominated the same person, and it's also for the first time someone that already got a medal. Welcome up, once again, Ashley!

Now the cheering had to limits. Ashley almost fainted but got her third medal. Soon, the graduation was coming to its end and Carl was about to round off the whole event from the stage.

– And now this year's graduation ceremony is completed except for one more performance. This is a very accomplished singer that I had to work hard to persuade to sing today. Give a big round of applause to Ashley!

– Thank you, she said as she reached up and adjusted the microphone to her height. I don't know if you expect disability humor, Carl, but in that case you will probably be disappointed. Yeah, just stare at me, I'm in a wheelchair! So what? In some strange way, I feel like I already been on this stage before today, but that's probably just my imagination? I've planned to sing my own song, and since I can't play any instruments then an acquaintance of me helped me find some musicians. Can you please come onto the stage, girls?

Three musicians came in from the side with violin and flute while one of them sat down behind the drums. Now Ashley began to sing the song with her own lyrics and Lisa's music. Everyone in the audience was impressed by her voice and her singing technique. She sounded like the worst professional singer and the song she sang was not of the picks either.

After the song the audience cheered and screamed, drowning all her attempts to say something.

– Thank you... Thank you... Thank you all... Thanks... But, shut up now, I'm actually trying to say something!

Finally, there was silence.

– First I want to say that I have not written the melody of my song itself. It's my friend Lisa who helped me with it. Yes, I mean the super celebrity Lisa who was paying together with Añeđliká and now circle the globe with her own music. She's my guardian angel and my idol. Are there more here who likes Lisa?

The crowd roared in agreement.

– Well the graduation is over now, so all of you who want to can leave. But for you who want to hear some more, I wonder if you want me to sing one of her songs too, because I can almost every single one by heart. What do you say?

The crowd cheered wildly and she began to sing Lisa's latest hit to everyone's delight. The light had dimmed so no one saw that Lisa crept up on stage too until she joined in the second verse while she rolled into the stage light. The crowd went wild when they saw that Lisa was there in person. She and Ashley sat next to each other and sang the song as a duet.

The cheers after the song didn't end but Lisa was not finished by a long shot. She picked up a guitar and started playing so that the windows rattled, while Ashly began beating on a couple of strange drums. All young people stood up as one person and started jumping up and down. To everyone's surprise, it was not just Lisa singing but also Ashley joined in the chorus, and sometimes it was even she who sang some verses. The light pulsed with the rhythm and it became obvious to everyone that this must have been planned and rehearsed. After several songs then eventually Lisa started to talk in an interlude before the final verse:

– Hello, it's late, it's time to quit. Lisa is my name, the forest is my habitat. I have Louella Mooney on drums... Deborah Lewis on violin... Sophie Anderson on flute and keyboard... finally rhythm and background choir Ashley Cox!

Then they finished the song in a powerful crescendo and then all was in one line at the front of the stage bowing to the applause would not stop. Everyone was completely amazed that Ashley had succeeded in initiating this show with both Lisa and her musicians here at the graduation. Finally both of them left the stage

together with the musicians and left the building to go into Lisa's tour bus that had appeared in the parking lot.

The students left the school gym making a loud murmur. It was unbelievable what Ashley had done! Not only did she got Lisa to sing, she had been an active part of the show with such self confidence as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Ashley ended the day in a restaurant with both her parents and Lisa. Now it seemed as if nothing could stop her anymore. She was so full of energy right now, so she almost burst.

~ ~ ~

She went home with her father immediately after graduation. At first it was wonderful to spend time with him. He made an effort really so she would enjoy herself. They went out on excursions, zoos and other things she liked to do. Although she managed quite well in the wheelchair now, she got too much time to ponder now that she no longer had any school work to do. She also missed hanging out with Amy, so one night she called Amy.

– Hey, Amy. How about I drive back to Princeton to morrow in the morning, so we can go and check out guys as before?

– Well, would not it be fun. It's just that...

– What is it? You have never say no to that before.

– Then I'm not home right now. You know me and Pete have been dating for a while. He asked me to follow him home to meet his parents, so I'm actually in South Carolina right now. His folks has invited me to the theater tonight.

It felt like Ashley received a blow in her stomach. Amy had a serious relationship now! She felt almost jealous, for she herself had never even been invited on a date with any guy yet. Damn this wheelchair! How would she ever be happy like Amy, when no guys even wanted to look twice at her? But that was not Amy's fault, so she tried to respond with a easy tone:

– Great fun for you, Amy! I'm really happy for you.

– I don't really know when I get back. We can meet later in the summer?

– Sure, Amy. We'll do that. Have fun.

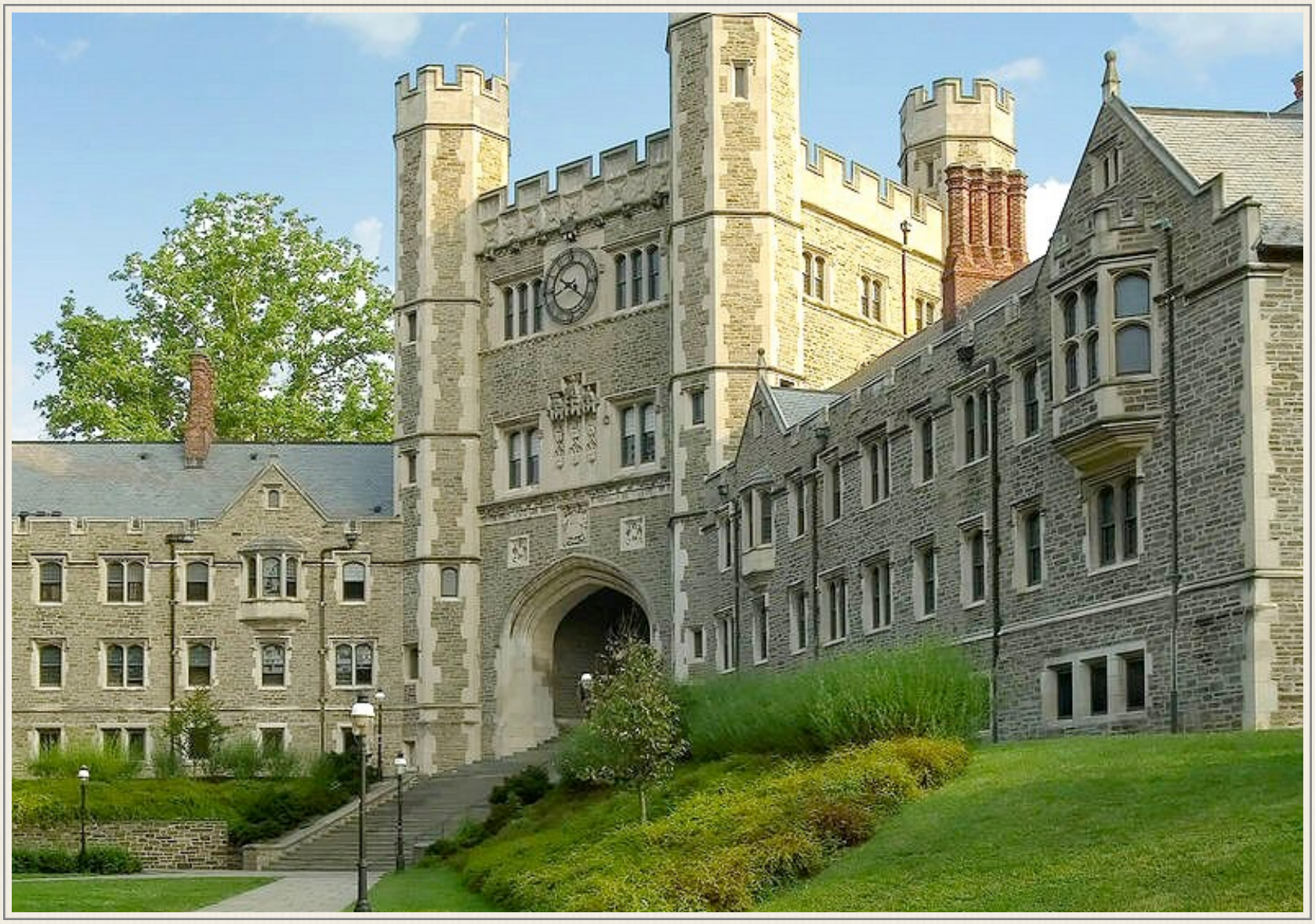
Ashley ended the conversation and then threw the phone on the wall. She threw herself on the bed and cried quietly, so her father would not hear of it. The phone had landed on the bed so when she calmed down a bit, she inspected it anxiously, but it had survived. The tears continued to flow as she began to brood over the future. What future? In addition to school, what did she have? Nothing! She cried herself to sleep that night.

The rest of the summer went painfully slow, and she sank deeper into the depression. Her father realized that something was not right, but didn't dare to ask. He tried to think of fun things for her to do and then just hoped that the depression would be over soon.

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CHAPTER 12

# University



Ashley rolled into the large building. It had been a bit complicated to get up for the high staircase outside the entrance. “I have to find another way in next time,” she thought. So this was how Princeton University looked on the inside. There were lots of people everywhere, and many was like her searching for one place or an other. Many were staring after her when she came in her wheelchair.

It was especially a gang of five guys who looked pretty tough out who threw derisive comments after her. Her mood dropped and she got a knot in the stomach of both anger and despair. Should this wheelchair never stop tormenting her?

She tried to shake off the taunting and concentrated on finding where she should enroll. Soon she managed to orient herself, was enrolled and got a locker and a pile of papers.

During the next few weeks, she focused on her school work and tried to find her way back to the emotional state from the high school where the wheelchair no longer irritated her. It was not so easy because she constantly heard comments about her and all the time noticed people who looked after her. She constantly felt staring eyes in her neck, even when there weren't any. For each day that passed she felt worse and worse, though she managed quite well to hide her emotions outwardly.

One morning when she came rolling towards school, she was really annoyed. It was a road construction ongoing on the road to the bus stop so not only had the bus been late, she also had fallen out of her wheelchair because the sidewalk was unpaved and only consisted of loose sand. She looked at the clock and realized she only had five minutes before the bell rang, and it was still a difficult staircase.

– Check out that one over there in the wheelchair. Damn how silly she looks!

– Hey girl, try to roll a little faster!!

The voices was followed by taunting laughter, and she looked back. The gang with the five guys was standing as usual on the gravel-yard in front of the gateway. They commented loudly anyone walking past that looked a little different. When they caught sight of Ashley as they had begun to laugh and mock her as usual.

Her mood fell if possible to even lower levels, and it felt as if the wheelchair was on fire under her. She sat still for a few seconds and felt the fury grew within her. "Damn this wheelchair," she thought. "And fuck those idiots".

Now something snapped inside her and she spun around and rolled up to the group to confront the one who have been most taunting. For her mother's sake she

made an effort to just talk in a calm tone despite the rage that was bubbling within her.

– Like, it's not my fault that I'm in a wheelchair, so I would be grateful if you stopped teasing me, especially as I'm already depressed from it.

The guy who talked, a slender man with short, blond hair, replied cheekily.

– Well, but it's so fun to tease, you know.

The others agreed. Ashley frowned and tried again.

– Don't you understand that you make me feel bad when you're doing that? Please, I beg you to stop taunting me.

– I think she's going to start crying soon. Go down on your knees and pray little girl, then perhaps we can consider quitting, said the biggest of the boys, called David from what Ashley heard before.

The new guy, the one Ashley first approached, glanced at David, who expectantly looked back at him, before he added.

– It's probably best if you just roll away and cry somewhere else, girl!

– I really think that you should be careful with your words. This school has certainly rules against discrimination of disabled people. If nothing else, there are the laws about that, as you probably know.

David laughed mockingly and poked the blond guy in his side.

– I think you got a little afraid of her there, Terry. Should not you do something about it?

– Get out of here, girl. Just roll inside to avoid trouble, Terry said.

– Cut it out, otherwise I don't know what Im gonna to, Ashley said irritated.

– Ooooh, I actually think that he is shaking with fear now, David said to the blond guy. Right, Terry?

Terry looked uncomfortable and bent forward and pulled up Ashley out of the wheelchair slightly and then hit her in her stomach with his fist. The punch was

totally unexpected so Ashley lost her air and could just sit there trying to catch her breath again. The guys laughed at her, even if her attacker's laugh sounded a bit strained.

– Yes, damn it. There she got what she deserved! David laughed.

The guys taunting laughter echoed in her ears as she slowly got her breath back. Now everything snapped for Ashley and she grabbed the guy's shirt and slammed his head right down to the armrest of the wheelchair with all her strength. He screamed and held his nose which immediately started to bleed.

– Damn it, I think you broke my nose, he howled.

But Ashley was not nearly finished yet. She spun around the wheelchair and tripped him backwards down to the ground with neck hitting in the gravel hard. Then she threw herself out of the wheelchair and landed on his stomach. She began hitting him in his face with her closed fists. It was no gentle slaps, Ashley had by now become frightening strong in her arms from all her weight training. Terry began to feel dizzy from the hard fists that landed on his head and tried in vain to protect his face.

In desperation, he grabbed Ashley and got her down on her back. Then he hit her over her left eye with his fist. It sang in her head, but she still had presence enough to avoid his next stroke from his left fist, making him hit the ground instead. Terry made a grimace of pain. He aimed again with his right hand, but she caught his arm in the air and twisted it hard so that he ended up on his belly in the dirt. She locked his right arm behind his back with her left arm and blocked his left arm by lying on it.

Then she began to alternately rubbing his face in the gravel and pounding his head into the ground. He tried to get loose but it was hopeless and he became more and more dizzy. He began to be terrified that she would hurt him seriously. He simply couldn't get loose, but got his head rammed into the gravel again and again. The other boys didn't dare to intervene, frightened by her uncontrolled fury. One of the guys said, a little startled:

– Calm down a bit, girl. I think he's had enough already.

But Ashley was furious and kept beating Terry's head hard into the ground while the other began to fear that she would assault them too. Terry started to black out when he to his relief heard a voice screaming:

– What are you doing, youngsters? Stop with that immediately!!

It was the counsellor at school who was passing and gone to investigate what the screaming crowd was doing. When he saw Ashley laying down, banging a guy's head into the ground next to a wheelchair he drew his own conclusions. Ashley still didn't hear anything so the counsellor roared again, even more angrily. Then finally Ashley calmed down, sat up and looked guilty. The guy just kept laying there gasping for air.

– What's the name of you two?

– Ashley Cox, she replied quietly with her eyes to the ground.

– That guy is called Terry Rice, one of the guys said as Terry obviously could not talk at the moment.

– You can be assured that I will report this to the principal when he returns on Monday. I have never witnessed such bad behavior!

Just then the school bell rang to the first lesson, so the counsellor got into a hurry and left with quick, angry steps. The rest of the gang also set off in a hurry while Ashley crawled back to the wheelchair that has rolled away a several feet and pulled herself up. With a contemptuous glance at the two who remaining guys, she also rolled towards the door. Terry got up on all fours and slowly moved his head back and forth to make it clear up.

– Vincent, please. You have to help me up, I can't see anything for all the gravel in my eyes.

Vincent helped Terry to his feet. He was very unsteady and Vincent had to support him as he walked. With a effort he helped Terry into the toilet room where he hung himself over the basin and began to wash his eyes with water and slowly get back his balance. His head was pounding and his eyes were deep red

from all the gravel. The left eye was swollen shut, his right cheek had a wound and he had also received a swollen lip from Ashley's fists.

– Hell, what just happened? he groaned as he tried to focus on his image in the mirror. Did I just get my ass kicked by a girl?

– You actually got ass kicked pretty bad. By a girl. In wheelchair.

– Shi-it. You can't understand how strong that little girl is. She held my arm like a wrestler and her fists felt like sledgehammers. I think she got dynamite in her arms!

Finally he managed to walk on his own power and staggered off to his first lesson. The rest of the day, Terry was teased by David that he had been whipped by a girl. But Vincent, who had known Terry since childhood, just looked wistful at Terry. Not derisively as the others. Vincent knew that Terry was not a weakling really. But right now he looked somewhat worn out, to say the least.

– How can I ever get the respect back from David, Jacob and the others?

– You know, I have an idea. You have to challenge her again, after school. Write a note that you want to settle the score once and for all, and see if she dares to show up!

– You are crazy! Do you think I want more beating?

– No, I'm talking about challenging her in arm wrestling, do you get it?

– But, there is great risk that I lose in that too. You don't know how much muscle is found in that little body!

– Sure, it's possible. With that doesn't matter, it's a win – win situation for you, you see. Probably she dares not to come, and then you wins. If you defeat her, you get respect. If you lose, you have proven that she is so strong that there is no shame to get beaten by her.

Terry was still hesitant but eventually placed a note in Ashley's cabinet. When she was on her way home, she read the note with astonishment, but without being scared. Instead, she rolled out to the park where the whole gang sat waiting on some benches in the playground.

– So what will happen now? Shall you and I just start bashing each other again, or what? Haven't you gotten enough beating yet?

– No, no, not that way. Arm wrestling. If you dare, that is. Come on, girl!

Terry put his arm in front of him and looked at her with a challenging stare.

– Forget it! Not a chance that it will be fair when you're surrounded by your buddies. Clearly you will cheat!

– No chance. Eric here will be the referee, and he can be trusted.

– My integrity has never been questioned, Eric said. Whether I would somewhat have any favorites, then it's beyond me to allow that to blur my judgment as a referee. I assure you, my lady, that my judgement will for sure be extraordinary objectively.

– He's a little crazy as you hear, but he's always fair.

Ashley shrugged and pulled herself over to the bench across from Terry and took his hand. Eric held their hands and corrected their arms until he was satisfied. Then he counted to three and released.

Terry pressed down and got Ashley's hand an inch above the table. Then it came to a stop. Ashley had been doing a lot of arm wrestling when she trained and had learned a lot about technique.

– Come on, Terry. You can do better! Now show me that you are a man!

Ashley talked and teased seemingly unmoved while Terry was sweating with the effort to press her arm down. Jacob was chewing a gum as Ashley asked to get a piece which she stuffed in her mouth. All while Terry struggled with all his strength. To humiliate him even more, she took her phone in her left hand and made a "selfie" photo of them.

Then she just waited and continued teasing until Terry got tired in his arm trying to bring down her arm the last inch and then, when he relaxed for a second, slammed down his hand on the other side instead.

– Ashley winner! Eric shouted.

– Best of three, right? she smiled teasingly and blew a bubble with the chewing gum.

The second time she attacked directly before Terry had time to react and the match was over in seconds.

– Best of five, right? she said even more teasingly.

– Can you stop fooling around like that, and face me like a man? Terry complained.

– Sure I can, if you wish. Despite the fact that I'm not a man. You may have noticed that I'm just a weak girl, right?

Terry heard some laughs could not help but smile a little. The third time it was a real struggle between them when it first surged back and forth until Ashley finally pushed his hand with brute force. Terry was beaten and looked at David.

– Try it yourself if you don't believe how strong this girl is!

David switched places with Terry.

– Hey there. I've already gone three matches while you are rested!

– I don't give a shit, girl. Put your arm up so that I can break it!

Ashley finally took his arm but fooled him. The second before Eric said, "three", she gave David a kiss on his mouth so that he was so perplexed that he forgot to push back.

– I won again, Ashley chirped.

– No, you are disqualified, Eric said. No body contact allowed.

– You didn't say anything about that! You just said that one couldn't help with the other hand. Ah, what the heck, come on then, revenge?

David put his hand up again but was tricked one more time. When Eric started counting, Ashley pulled out her blouse a little so that David was too distracted by what was inside and forgot himself again.

– Ashley the winner! Eric shouted.

– What's wrong with you, weakling? Do you have difficulty concentrating? Just muscles but no brain, huh? But muscles, well, I don't know that either. Just a lot of inflated air, that's what you are!

Now Terry smiled with his whole face. He really enjoyed watching her tease with David like that. David, however, was not amused, but said irritably:

– Come on, girl. Are you too cowardly to face me seriously?

– Yes, well come on shrimp. Give me your arm again so I can break it off.

This time it was much more even. David had a lot of strength and kept the pressure on but Ashley didn't give an inch, but fought back. David worked so hard that he became blue in his face but still was not able to press her arm down. Finally, his elbow lost contact with the table by the effort.

– Disqualified. Ashley is the winner, Eric exclaimed.

David was red and demanded another rematch, but now Ashley had enough.

– Three chances is enough. It's not my fault you neither have muscles nor brain. Probably you have nothing inside your pants either.

She slipped back into her wheelchair and began to roll away while the gang tried not to laugh at David who was red like a tomato in his face of equal parts anger and shame. Terry shouted after her:

– Girl, wait a minute. I'm feel kind of bad from that thing this morning, I hope we're cool with each other anyway?

Ashley waved a little with her hand and kept rolling. Terry run up to her and started talking with a low, much softer voice.

– It's true. Ashley, what I did this morning is completely inexcusable and unjustified. I sincerely apologize for it and promise you it will never happen again. What I'm saying is that I only got what I deserved. I expect no forgiveness from you, Ashley, but still hope that you can find in your heart to put this unfortunate incident behind you.

Ashley looked at him with mild astonishment. This didn't sound at all like a roughneck that she had a fight with that morning.

– Sure, sure, it's okay. We forget the whole thing. Actually, I also ask for forgiveness for that I attacked you so violently. It was unnecessarily brutal.

– You have nothing to apologize for. It was completely and totally my fault.

Terry nodded and went back to the gang. Ashley looked pensively after him. She shook off her surprise and rolled home for the weekend.

~ ~ ~

Next Monday Ashley was, as expected, called to the principal. She met Terry outside his office, apparently they was called simultaneously. Terry immediately began to apologize again for what he did.

– Ashley, I'm so terribly sad for what I did last Friday.

– Not as sad as I'm, anyway.

– I can imagine that. Excuse me anyway for everything I did.

Ashley just shrugged and said it didn't matter. She thought he was just trying to get an advantage before the conversation with the principal. Soon the two was facing the principal who stared at Terry.

– What kind of man are you? To attack a helpless girl in a wheelchair like that! What on earth were you thinking?

– I was not thinking at all, and I regret of course what I did.

– I shall really hope that! It's totally unbelievable! To sit on a disabled girl's back like that, banging her head into the ground! Yes, I've heard everything what happened! You will of course be suspended, the only question is how long. Right now, I'm tending towards to expel you permanently! Have you anything to say in defense?

Ashley looked at surprise Terry and expected that he would protest. But he just kept apologizing.

– What I did was in-reprehensible and I really have no explanation, just a promise that I will never do it again, if I'm allowed to stay at the school. I realize that I must be punished for what I've done, and I'm just asking to get a chance to show that I can do better.

The principal didn't seem impressed and Ashley realized that Terry was going to take the full blame itself. She could not allow that.

– Well, she said. It was not quite like that, but...

– Ashley, it's okay, Terry said. Just keep quite. I'll take this.

– No, not at all, the principal said. It's you who should keep quiet. I definitely want to hear what she want to say. Go on, what do you want to say, Ashley?

Terry looked beseechingly on Ashley and shook his head. But she could not allow that he got all the blame.

– Well, it's me who sat on *his* back, slamming *his* head into the ground. I'm sorry for that, Terry, but I can't let you be expelled out for something I have done.

– Don't pull my leg! You're a girl and also handicapped!

But Ashley stood her ground so the principal called for the counselor. He was startled when he saw it was Ashley who was in a wheelchair. Never had he could guessed that, he had been convinced that it was Terry who was handicapped. How else would a girl be able to get the upper hand? But he had to explain to the astonished principal how it was before he left the trio and returned to his office.

The principal was very perplexed when he realized it was Ashley who had been aggressive and Terry was the victim. He could not think of anything to say, but thought to himself that he should have understood it, given how Terry's face looked. Instead, it was Terry who broke the silence.

– Still, it was me who started fighting. I hit her in her stomach even though she's in a wheelchair.

– Sure, sure, but it was not particularly hard. Furthermore, I provoked you by embarrass you in front of your friends.

– It was not until after I provoked you, anyway. And teasing you for something that you can't help.

– But still, I feel that I overreacted and attacked you too brutal. It's clearly my fault that we started fighting.

– I disagree. It was me who started the whole fight.

– Maybe, but I should have just rolled away and reported the incident to the principal instead. The fault is just mine.

– But my God. I hit you with my fist in your face. You have just managed to hide the black eye with makeup. It's inexcusable to beat a girl like that.

Rector viewed from the one to the other. They were sitting and defended each other instead of blaming each other! He led them keep on for awhile before he stopped them, full of wonder.

– Well, I can make no sense of this. You don't even seem to be enemies. It's impossible to establish which one of you is responsible for this. I'm thinking that we forget the whole thing. But first I want you both to ask each other sincerely for forgiveness. You start!

He pointed at Terry who turned to Ashley and looked her straight into her eyes.

– Ashley, I'm really sorry that I mocked you. Seriously sorry from the bottom of my heart. Even more because I hit you. I'm a man, and should never hit a women. The fact that you also sit in a wheelchair makes it totally inexcusable. Ashley, I don't expect that you can ever forgive me, because I did is unforgivable. But I want you to understand, Ashley, that I'm deeply regretful that I was so raw and malicious.

Ashley was really touched by what he said, because it felt as if he really meant what he said. She gathered herself and responded.

– You are forgiven, Terry. I also ask you for forgiveness because I attacked you. I totally overreacted and'm really sorry for that and I'm sorry that I hurt you. Please forgive me for my uncalled for outbursts of rage.

– I forgive you, Ashley. And speechless with admiration for your strength and courage.

The principal said he would keep his eyes on them both and that he would not accept any more nonsense from any of them before letting them go. Outside, Terry turned towards Ashley and said with insecure, flickering eyes.

– Well, Ashley, I meant what I said in there. I'm really sorry for what I did to you, and...

– Hey, come on now. It's enough with excuses for gods sake. You were silly and was stupid, I overreacted but all that is history now. If you try to apologize one more time, I will turn you upside down on you push you down a toilet.

– Yeah, well, right. You could surely to that without problems. Though, therefore, it's just that, well, I would like to ask you a question. It's like this, that I thought about you the whole weekend and I... don't get mad, please, all I just want to is just...

Ashley raised her eyebrows and waited. Terry weighed over from one foot to the other and looked really worried. Ashley began to be curious about what he wanted.

– Well, then, what would you say about going to a movie on Saturday? We can, like, take a bite somewhere first. Take it easy, I'll book everything and pay for it all. Please...?

Ashley could not believe her ears.

– Are you asking me out on a date, or what?

– Yes, well, it's like what I do. Don't be mad, I mean no harm. I... well... I just want to get to know you a little better, if I may.

Ashley was so surprised that she didn't know what she would answer. But this man in front of her didn't have much in common with the roughneck who teased her last week, so she accepted.

When she came home, she seemed so confused that Judith was really worried. Of course she knew what happened before the weekend, as they still had a truth pact with each other.

– What has happened, love? You look so confused and worried. Has something bad happened in school today? Was the meeting with the principal today too hard?

– No, it went well with the principal, I got away with a warning. He couldn't decide whom of us that started the fight. It's what happened next that bothers me. I'm so confused right now that I don't know what to do. Mother, I really ask you for advice now. You must help me with this!

Judith sat down, and asked her daughter to tell everything. She explained what happened at the principal's office and then said that Terry asked her for a date.

– So, what should I do? Is he interested in me or is it a trick he does to be mean to me?

– It's impossible to know for sure, especially as I have not met him. What's your gut feeling? What kind of person is he really?

– Well, he's like two persons. Sometimes insecure and soft and sometimes self-confident and tough.

– Maybe he just plays tough in front of his friends. Do like this, darling. If he is a gentleman he will come to pick you up. Ask him to come fifteen minutes earlier because your mother wants to ask him a few things. Then I try to figure him out through some provocative questions. We'll see how he reacts.

– But how do I know what you think of him? You can't say in front of him that you think that he's bad company.

– No, that would be rude. Let's do like this. When I say "goodbye" to you then I will use positively charged words if I believe in him, but negatively charged words if I don't believe in him. For example, "have a nice evening" means good while "don't do anything stupid now," means bad. And if he will not pick you up, or if he refuses to talk to me, just set simply cancel your date.

– That sounds great, Mum. Let's do it like that.

~ ~ ~

On Saturday, Terry came to picked her up, and was invited inside when Judith opened the door.

– Ashley is almost ready, she just need a few minutes. Come in and wait.

Terry walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa that Judith pointed on. After a while Ashley came into the room, dressed up with makeup and styled hair. Terry stood up and just gasped for breath. She looked completely different from when she was in school. He thought that he had never seen anyone as beautiful before.

– Wow, incredible, he said. You look simply stunning this evening, Ashley!

– Like, I've just changed some clothes. Mom, didn't you have some questions?

– Not really. I want to explain to you, Terry, what I expect of you. And when I say *expect*, I want you to know that if you betray me, I will hunt you down with my husband's baseball bat and beat you up. Do you understand?

– Of course, Mrs Cox, he replied, a bit startled.

– First, I want you to know that my daughter is sensitive and I don't accept that she will get hurt. You should know, Terry, my daughter and I have a truth pact where we tell each other everything, good and bad. So regardless of what your feelings happen to be now, or becomes in the future, I *expect* that you are completely honest with her always. Darling, the same applies for you to him. And our truth pact doesn't apply to things that he says to you in confidence, so in that way Terry should know that he can tell you everything. So for example if you find someone else that you yearn for, maybe with twice as large breasts, you just have to tell my daughter before she finds it out from another source. It's better if you make her sad by ending the relation, than if you betray her with someone else. Can I *expect* that from you, Terry?

– Of course you can. Integrity must always be the cornerstone of any effective relationship, and I have a serious interest in your daughter. I have no problem promising to be totally honest with her.

– That sounds good. Then there is one more thing. But first, can you guess my age?

– Oh, well. You don't look a day older than thirty.

– Flattery will give you no benefits, so watch yourself. However, you are not completely wrong, I will become 34 this year. With some math, you can figure out how old I was when Ashley was born, and what I did in high school. Well, Terry. This I what I *expect* of you...

Terry counted backwards and guessed what Ashley's mom was going to say and decided to be first.

– I assure you, Mrs. Cox, that my intentions for your daughter are both honest and virtuous.

– Blah, blah. I know from experience what hormone-stuffed guys at your age want and what equally hormone-stuffed girls want and that neither of you can control you when the mood takes over. So, my young gentlemen, what I *expect* of you is that you always have condoms in your pocket every time you meet my daughter, and that you use them when necessary.

Terry almost fell off the chair and Ashley became red in her face. None of them had expected that comment and it took a long time before Terry managed to find a response.

– It would never occur to me to go against you, Mrs. Cox, so if that's what you expect, I'm prepared to fulfill it. With all due respect for your background, I have no interest in becoming a father until I'm in a stable relationship and has an otherwise stable foundation with all that implies.

Judith sat for a moment and looked at him while he fidgeted from a mild discomfort. Finally she said:

– Well, then I hope that both of have a nice time tonight. And, Ashley, if for any reason you don't come home right after the cinema you just text me so I know.

– Oh yeah, Mom. See you later.

She rolled quickly out of the door followed by Terry, who hurried past her to open the car door for her. After she lifted herself over to the car seat she asked him to put the wheelchair in the trunk. Soon they were on their way to the restaurant in an embarrassed silence. Ashley finally broke the silence.

– Terry, I apologize for my mother. I had never imagined that she would say something like that. How embarrassing! "Condoms in your pocket." Oh my God!

– She caught me with my pants down there. No, not literally, though. Well, she took my by surprise. Ugh, I don't know what to say.

– Shit how embarrassing this has become. Damn my mother!

– I want you to know, Ashley, I have no plans whatsoever to... well, you know... become intimate. But on the other hand, there is nothing in you that makes me not want to, but... well, not today that is.

– Change the subject, damn it! Just change it!! I really don't want to think about her damn condoms right now. And she additionally hints that I might follow you home after the cinema...

– Here are the restaurant now. We must try to forget that now.

The restaurant that Terry had chosen was really romantic and was known for having really good food. The conversation between them was a little strained at first, but when the food finally arrived, Ashley couldn't hold back her question anymore.

– Terry, it's one thing that I wonder. I don't want any excuses anymore, but I'm just curious why you teased me before and then suddenly ask me out.

– I can understand that you're confused. You want a short or long explanation?

– Aren't we here to get to know each other? I guess the long one is fine.

– Okay, this is how it is. I'm actually from Jacksonville and went to university there. But as I was lonesome and almost bullied there I did everything I could to be accepted but it just didn't work. My schoolwork crashed and the grades dropped, so that I didn't even get approved in several subjects.

– I know about that. Almost ended up there myself.

– When I realized I would have to repeat the year, I decided to change the environment completely. Here in Princeton my childhood friend Vincent lives. He moved here with his family a few years ago when his father got a new job in NY. So when I started here, I decided not to be left out again, so me and Vincent entered David and his gang because he is like the most popular guy in school.

– David, it's that guy with all the muscles that I humiliated in the park?

– Exactly. So, I can't apologize anymore, but it was actually he who wanted to tease you and I was just went along to be accepted into the gang. It didn't feel good when you became sad, but it was so hard to get out of it without losing face.

– When I think about it, it was probably David who was actually the worst.

– Enough about me now. After all, I asked you out because I want to get to know you. Tell us a little about yourself. Who are you, really?

– I guess you want to know how I ended up in a wheelchair?

– If you think that the wheelchair defines who you are, then fine. But I'd rather know who you are for real.

Ashley got all warm inside. "Wow, it seems as he don't care about the wheelchair", she thought. So she told him instead of her childhood, how her mother was too young when she became pregnant, and the problems between her parents. Terry sat and listened with interest. He turned out to be really nice to talk to when he was out of reach from the gang. It also turned out that they had a lot of common interests, so the conversation began to run more and more smoothly. Ashley began to entrust part of her bad memories and it felt really good to speak out about them. Terry listened to her without judging or show excessive compassion. Most important of all was that he didn't seem to care that she was in a wheelchair.

The food tasted fantastic and Ashley began to enjoy her first date. When they was waiting for their dessert, Ashley couldn't resist any longer and she held out her left hand to show the scars on the wrist. He grabbed her hand and stroked her wrist gently with his other hand and let his fingers move down into her palm. She giggled, but didn't protest.

- If you want to explain why you got these scars one day, then I will listen carefully. Though in my opinion, the future is more important than the past.

Ashley felt like a complete peace descended upon her. It was so true, what he said! The whole atmosphere between them had become so nice.

The movie was also really nice, Terry had chosen a romantic comedy that both touched her and made her actually laugh several times. He had picked seats at the side so that she could easily pull herself over to one of cinema seats. To his surprise and delight, she took his arm and put it around her shoulders when the movie became romantic.

Throughout the whole evening, Terry was the perfect gentleman, and when he drove her home after the move, she thought it had been a really enjoyable date. So when Terry asked if he could take her out again another time, he was surprised he got a kiss from her.

– I really had a nice evening and would love to date you again.

– Then, see you in school on Monday.

And so it became. Terry socialized more and more with Ashley during school breaks. It was not seen kindly by David who after a few days confronted him as he sat in a break area talking with Ashley.

– Hey, Terry, are you takin' to this invalid again? Where's your pride? If you want to continue to hang with me and the gang, you gotta dump this freak. So who will it be, she or us?

– She, Terry replied without hesitating a second.

– What!?! What did you say?

– I choose her. She is much better looking than you anyway.

– You have to be crazy! Are you choosing a weirdo in a wheelchair instead of being with the gang!

Now Ashley got fed up and demanded that he stopped teasing her. But David just laughed mockingly at her. She got angry and pulled him down across her lap and locked both his arms behind his back so that he couldn't get loose. He struggled with his legs but was helplessly stuck.

To his horror she then rolled into the boys' toilet with him and held his head over the urine gutter.

– Now, will you stop teasing me, or what? she asked.

– Let me go, you lunatic! Otherwise you will get into trouble!

She pushed his head in the gutter and flushed. Terry and several other guys stood around and laughed at him.

– Are you going to stop, or do you want more?

He struggled and tried to get loose without success. He swore and struggled but got only another shower for the trouble. How can she be so strong! There was nothing he could do to escape.

– Do you want to eat that candy bar that is laying there in the gutter, or will you be nice?

– No, stop. Please, I promise I will not tease you anymore.

– It's best you keep your promise, because next time I will not be this kind to you, make no mistake of that!

She dumped him flat inside the gutter, pressed the flush button one last time and rolled away. He snorted and swore but realized that he was completely embarrassed in front of his friends as he laid down on the floor, soaked from head to toe. Terry and the others' laughter echoed long in the ears of David.

After that day, David kept himself as far away from Ashley as possible and didn't dare to tease her anymore. He didn't want to have anything to do with Ter-

ry either, and that suited Terry just fine because he was tired of playing tough just to become popular. Instead, he gave all his attention to Ashley.

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Vincent had been sick all week but came back to school the next Monday. He found Terry outside the classroom.

– Hi, Vincent. Nice to see that you are on your feet again!

– It's nice to be healthy again. But what is it that happened between you and David, really? I met David outside and he said I had to choose between him and you, and he called you a scumbag.

– I got enough of his attitude towards anyone who looks different. So who did you choose then, him or me?

– You and I have known each other since we were little, so it's obvious that I chose you. So now David don't want to have anything to do with me either. It suits me fine, because I don't need him anymore. I have you and Josephine.

– Yeah, your girlfriend. You've been together for a while now, right?

– Exactly. It's getting really tight between us now.

– Fun for you. Good luck in love, then!

– Thanks. She and I have actually discussed over the phone while I was sick in bed. I want to take her up to my parents' cottage in the mountains this coming Thanksgiving to do some fishing and cuddling.

– That sounds nice, I've been with you to that cottage before. Primitive but nice and wonderful nature surrounding it.

– Josephine seems on to it, but her parents demand she has an chaperon. Don't you know any girl that would like to go there, so you and her can join us? That way Josephine's parents will be satisfied. It can be like a double date.

– Sure, it sounds like a good idea. I'll asked Ashley if she wants to join.

– It sounds good, do that. Wait! Did you say Ashley? The girl in wheelchair?

– Just the same. She's really nice once you get to know her.

– Are you together in any way?

– Well, we hang out together at present, actually. That is why David doesn't like me anymore. But she's actually a great girl.

– She can certainly be that, but you must understand that she will not be able to climb up to the cottage!

– Oh, of course she can!

– But hey, think a little!

– If Josephine can do it, then Ashley can do it too. I'll ask her. It will be super, you'll see!

Terry hurried away to look for Ashley while Vincent stood looking doubtful after him. This would never work, was Terry completely up in the sky? When Terry found Ashley and asked her, she responded that she happily went along. She didn't know why Vincent was sure it was a lousy idea.

Moreover, something was about to happen at the university that could derail all the progress that Ashley has done since the attack.



CHAPTER 13

# Last impediments



Ashley was happy thinking about the trip to the cottage together with Terry, Vincent and Josefine. She gave her heart and soul to her school work while she continued to hang out with Terry. At the same time she felt a kind of undefinable uneasiness, as if something terrible was about to happen.

One day when she was on her way to her classroom, she saw a familiar face far away. "I'm imagining" she thought and kept rolling.

But the next days, she saw the same face at several times so on the fourth day, she decided to find out once and for all if she imagined it or not. So when she saw him again at a distance, she set off in the wheelchair. Several other was forced to jump aside when she came rushing, but soon she caught up with him.

– Hey, wait a minute, she said.

The man turned and flinched when he saw her.

– George, what the hell are you doing here?

– Oh, it's you Ashley. You must know that I just got out on my parole, and have returned here. I came out a few months earlier for good behavior if I promised to resume my studies. Wait! Don't say you attend this school too?

– Damn, damn, damn.

Ashley banged her head into the armrests of her wheelchair.

– Yes, I attend here too. But how the hell can I go to the same school as you? You must understand that? Do you have to go exactly at this university?

– I am sincerely sorry. But, you know that I'm poor as a rat now because of the damages I paid. The only university I can go on is this. I had already paid the fee here, and the school said it was impossible to get it back. However, they agreed that I restarted here without paying one more time. But I don't want to go at the same school as you, for your sake. How can we solve this?

– I have no idea, I can't just change school now that I have already begun. Why do you have to go here? %&$#?@!

Ashley rarity swore, but this time she did it profusely and angrily rolled away, leaving an unhappy George. She went straight to the principal's office and knocked. Rector did not really think students would just visit like that without an appointment, but when he recognized her, he became uncertain, and let her come in.

– What's the matter? he asked.

– Well, I just met George Hunter in the hallway. He explained that he is here because he could't get the tuition fee that he paid two years ago returned, but can use it this year instead. Is this true, and can't you make an exception this time?

He was taken by surprise from her rapping words and hesitated for a brief moment before he answered.

– I can not go into specifics of a particular student, you see. Generally, though, so you may in some deserving cases get allowed to use an already paid tuition fee for another school year if one has been prevented to go when it was thought, for reasons which he or she has no control over.

– So you mean that he can't help that he ended up in prison? Yes, I know he's done some time for assault. I also know that he is still on parol for the rest of his sentence.

– It is not possible for me to comment on what the reasons were that he was prevented to go two years ago. Let me say that the school knows the reason and has accepted it as a valid reason.

– So you actually mean that is's a valid reason that he stabbed a knife in my back outside this very school? And that I should just accept that I must go to the same school as him even though I ended up in a wheelchair and tried to kill myself several times because of him?

The headmaster went completely pale, shocked by what she said. He realized that she knew more about George than he himself knew.

– This is terrible to hear. I had no idea that it was you that were his victim. But that he could get his tuition fee back, because of imprisonment is completely ruled out, unfortunately. And the fact that he committed a crime must be dealt with by the courts and not by the school. However, we thought that he could get another chance, so he does not become a burden on society but can help instead. But I did not know about this.

– No, I don't think that you knew it either, she said with a softer voice. But if I feel that I have to leave school because of him, can not you make an exception for me and let me get my fee repaid?

– There are no rules that allow it. But I actually will take it up with the school board and ask. Personally I think we should make an exception, for this is of course a completely extreme situation.

– Do that, please. Now I don't know yet if I want to leave, or how I will solve this mess. But something needs to be done. I will have to think deeply about this.

She thanked the principle and rolled out of the office. Now she had much to brood over again. In the evening, her mother noticed that she was not in the mood and became really worried.

– Is it something that happened at school, you look so sad?

– The worst ever has happened. I discovered today that George goes to the same school as me.

– Which George? Wait a minute! I hope not that one!

– Oh yeah, it's the one that stabbed me! Right now I honestly don't know if I can stay at that school anymore.

– But it surely must be he who will be forced to change school? It's not your fault any of this.

– But it is like my fault. That's why I'm so angry with myself. First of all he attacked me right outside this university, so I knew he was attending it then. Then I, as you know, was on his parole hearing when he asked for additional months probation. And there he said that the reason was that wanted to resume his studies. I was called there to give my opinion if he should get what he wanted. So there I should of course have known that he will attend Princeton University, and ensured that I chose something else.

– But still, he should change.

– Maybe, but his only chance getting an education and a decent life, is right there. For according to the principal, he can't get back his tuition fee. Why should he suffer because I made a mistake? But at the same time, I of course don't want to have to see him every day. I have no idea what I shall do now.

Ashley sighed deeply as she rolled into her room while her mother anxiously looked after her.

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The next few days Ashley did everything to avoid George while she hesitated about what she should do. She had called several of the other schools she had been interested in, but no one could accept her this year. So if she would drop out of here then she could not start again until after about a year, and she definitely didn't feel for that.

Suddenly one day, there was a paper posted everywhere in the school with a picture of George and a true provocative text.




Ashley froze. Who had put up this paper? My God, George must believe that it was she who made it! She shuddered but knew immediately what she must do. She found out in which classroom he currently attended a lesson and sat outside waiting while she tried to prepare herself. When the class was over, she got his attention when he came out.

– Come here, I have something to say.

George hesitated for a few seconds, but then followed her to an empty part of the corridor.

– George, I guess you seen the paper that is posted around the school. I hope you don't think it's me that is responsible for it, because it's not. I promise!

– I had some suspicion it was you, but still felt that it didn't really seem to be your style.

– No, it's absolutely not. I would never stab anyone in the back like that.

– Ouch, that really hurt. But I'm sincerely glad that is not you.

Ashley nodded and rolled away to her next class. The principal had also seen the paper and become annoyed over it. He let to investigate who had made the paper and was soon informed about who, and called them to a meeting the same day. He also asked Ashley to come to his office.

– Thank you for coming, Ashley. I guess you've seen all the papers that were posted around the school.

– I have seen them but have nothing to do with them, I promise.

– Well, I already know that. The thing is that I have called the responsible to a meeting in fifteen minutes. Since you definitely is a party in the case, then I feel obliged to give you an open invitation to attend too. You should not feel you have to come, it's completely voluntary, especially as George Hunter is also invited to the meeting.

– Sure, I'm happy to attend, she responded to his surprise.

They sat and talked a few minutes. The principal asked if she thought more, and she explained that no other school could take her right now. He regretted that but said that the board has given half a promise that she would get back her tuition fee if she requested it. She just needed to submit some form of medical certificate certifying that she experienced it traumatic.

Then they went to the others in the group room. He presented her only by name, and then he introduced George and the remaining two persons, Jack and Simon. He then gave the word to Jack, because he was the the brain behind making the poster. He and Simon had looked hatefully at George since he came into the room, but George had just calmly returned their gaze.

– Alright, I'm proud to go to this fine university. It has always been a pleasure to walk around in these grand corridors. But now these corridors has suddenly been taken over by criminals and scum. I can't understand why this venerable school have allowed an ex-prisoner to start here. And not just any ex-prisoner. It's a really bad egg who has attacked a poor, helpless girl and left her bleeding to death on the street. There must be a mistake from the school, and possible to correct.

Simon tabbed in.

– Not only that he is a bad egg and ruthless villain, he only got two years in prison for his heinous crime! He should at least gotten lifetime, in my opinion.

– He should be castrated, and thrown to wild animals. People like him has no right to exist. Put him in the electric chair as the scum he is! We believe that the only acceptable is that he is expelled from school. Anything else is unthinkable given the horrific crimes that he got away with!

Ashley studied George to see how he reacted to the terrible words. He was totally calm on the outside and said nothing, but she could see how it jerked a little in his eyes and how he tightened his jaw. The principle then explained that George must have an opportunity to defend himself, so he gave the word to George. He began speaking with a soft voice, almost too quiet to hear.

– I will not deny that I just got out of prison after being sentenced for aggravated assault and attempted homicide. But I haven't got away with anything, but...

– You call two years to not have gotten away, your devil!

George fell silent when Jack interrupted him. Then he went on just as softly as before.

– I was convicted by a judge and got the punishment that he thought I deserved. Then...

– You deserve no less than a rope! Damn maniac!

– Well, you may think that, but I actually have despite redeemed...

– Redeemed? Redeem! Are you foolish or just stupid? Two years to hit a girl to the ground and then continued to beat her while she lays helplessly down! Everyone realizes that it's far too short punishment.

– That's not exactly what happened, but...

– Do you think we actually care how it happened, your damn...

Ashley had sat quiet  listening up until this moment. She had become more and more angry. Now she could not keep quiet any longer and she interrupted Jack with a sharp tone.

– Who are you to decide that the punishment is too short! There is a not a chance that a judge would listen to you if you would have been sitting at the trial. I'm totally convinced that he had...

– I think...

– SHUT UP, now I'm talking! God, what are you for a idiot? Didn't your mother teach you to not interrupt others?

Jack went silent and turned red in his face.

– The only one that can affect the judge besides the prosecutor is the victim, you are too stupid to understand that? And George here were not sentenced for two years, he got five years plus a really heavy damages compensation to the victim. Half the time was on parol, so right now he is out on parol, so the slightest mistake and he goes back in again. He meets his probation office on time and do everything expected of him. We actually have a legal system in this country that says that judges will judge, and also says that when you have completed the sentence you have payed your debt to the society. And no one can be tried twice for the same crime.

– How the hell can you know what punishment he received?

– Because I was sitting in the trial room and listened as the judge pronounced the judgment. Did you do that?

– Of course not, it was behind closed doors. Ant that why you can't possible have been there either! You're lying!

– Yes, I was there, believe me. I was there and witnessed about how George stabbed a knife into my back and paralyzed me. It was also I who was sitting in a break negotiating with him and his lawyer about what punishment he would receive. That's right, I'm the victim and I'm completely satisfied with the sentence. Why I'm satisfied is't none of your business! Just as you have no business with what punishment he received!

Jack and Simon was totally shocked when they found out about it. Simon picked up first and asked incredulously:

– So it's you who was abused? How on earth can you sit here and defend this creep?

– I'm absolutely not defending his actions. This man has ruined my life and I will never forgive him. What I defend are justice and our country's laws and views on law enforcement. We can't have a system where one who made a mistake is punished by the society for the rest of his life. What would you say if you had stolen a bicycle and then received life sentences for it?

– He has not stolen a bike! He has beaten and assaulted you so hard that you almost died in the process! You can't compare that!

– He was drunk and acted tough and put a knife in my backpack. His eyes were crossed and he missed the backpack and hit my back instead. His greatest crime was that he was stupid! Everything was over in maybe three seconds, and it almost cost him his life. No, go to hell with you and your demands. The only one who has the right to demand that he's expelled from here is me, so just shut your face up!

Jack had become red in his face both of anger and shame and went silent as the principal interrupted the dispute and stated:

– Now that's enough. I have listened to you all and am now going to explain to you what the school's opinion in this. It's like this...

– He gets expelled, of course!

– Do you really think that you can get away with interrupting the school principal? One more thing like that, Jack, and you're the one who will be expelled!

Jack became if possible even redder in his face.

– What I was going to say was that the crime that George did two years ago, of course, is terrible and it must not go past unpunished. But it has not, he has received the judgment of a court and is still serving his sentence. Neither the school nor anyone at the school can object to what the court decided. Moreover, since it took place outside the school premises and outside school hours then the school can't take any disciplinary action even if we wanted to.

He stared at Jack and Simon.

– What has happened should be and have been handled by the judiciary. I accept no insults or bullying at this school, so I expect that you two carefully think about what you are doing. George has as much right as you to attend to this school, as long as he behaves. Have you understood?

Jack had to bite his tongue not to protest further. The principal's tone and face showed the futility of it. So he and Simon murmured a "yes" before the principal dissolved the meeting. Jack and Simon left the room with their tails between their legs. George stopped Ashley before she and the principal had time to leave the room.

– Ashley, I want you to know that I'm incredibly grateful for what you just did. I know I don't deserve it so right now I'm ashamed something tremendous. But at the same time, my only chance for a future os right here at this school. And I will not let myself be affected by people like those two idiots. I will fight against all who want to make me to leave the school. But that doesn't apply to you. So here in the

presence of the principal, I promise you that if you want me to jump off this school, you just need to say it. One single word from you and I go straight to the principal and tell him that I'm leaving the school.

– Thank you George. I guess it makes it easier for me to decide what I want. But I don't know yet. I'm sorry to keep you on the edge like this.

– Take the time you need. I've forfeited my right to make any demands on you through the terrible thing that I did to you.

George went away and Ashley looked pensively after him. In the evening, she looked still so thoughtful that her mother had to ask what happened in school. Ashley told about the meeting that the principal had called.

– But it's good, right? Now it's more persons in the school that wants George to leave. Doesn't it feel nice anyway to have a couple who is on your side?

– Like, I became so terribly angry, but not at him but at the others. Like, they sat there and screamed and called him all sorts of horrible names but he just sat and spoke calmly and objectively, although he was brutally interrupted all the time. In the end, I spoke my guts out over those arrogant pricks, and in some way that meant that I defended George, how strange it's may sound. And the principle explained that the school could not do anything about what happens outside the school area.

– So you say that he will not leave?

– Well, after the meeting he promised me in the principal's presence that if I would just ask him, he would. But only if it was me who asked. And now I'm so confused, I don't know what to think.

– You know what I think. I want to just take a knife and cut him to pieces and feed the birds with him. But I know you, too, so I already know what you will decide. Right? You know that I will support you regardless.

Ashley was thinking of what her mother meant. Suddenly she realized that she actually already had made her decision. She just had not wanted to dress it in words yet, for some reason.

– I really hate the George made me paralyzed, I hate him so madly. But I don't think that the George who stabbed me in the back exists anymore. I don't like today's George either, and would prefer not to see him, but he doesn't attend the same classes as me, so I'll guess that he can stay there.

The day after she announced to the principal and George of her decision, that both she and George would continue at the school.

– But if it turns out that we are on the same course, you must do something about it, George! I don't want to be in the same classroom as you!

– Of course, Ashley. Then I simply change course. Thank you immensely for you is so great minded!

– Well, I read to become psychologist, so I guess I'll have to teach myself to always keep my calm and be collected.

When Jack and Simon heard it, they were not happy. Not at all happy. But given what the principal said, they had to accept it.

Ashley felt quite pleased with her decision. Somehow she had managed to overcome her worst trauma, to put it behind her and move on. Now she began to think of Thanksgiving again, and the trip she would do with the one that she had come to love more and more.

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When the holiday came, they all caught the train to the village which was closest to the cottage. Josephine's parents had called Ashley and asked her to watch over Josephine. It was probably lucky that they didn't know she was in a wheelchair. It was also lucky that Terry never told Ashley how difficult the path up to the cottage was, because then she would probably not have dared to join.

At first it went quite well, the path was quite wide and not too steep. But as they got higher it became narrower and rockier and with potholes everywhere. Vincent looked anxiously at her but Terry just chatted as usual as if they were walking on a wide paved street instead of a narrow, bumpy path through the woods. Ashley sweated and struggled but didn't want to show that it was difficult

because Terry didn't seem to care about it. She looked over her shoulder on Josephine who seemed to struggle even more with rising complaints to Vincent. Ashley heard her say something about that Vincent didn't explain what kind of shoes that were appropriate. So she biting her teeth together and pulled herself with an effort over all the obstacles that lay in the path.

The path became more and more difficult but Ashley refused to give up, or to ask for help. When they walked for several hours through the forest up the mountain, they came to a dirt road that they began to follow for a while. Ashley was grateful for that, but tried hard not to show it, or that she was completely dripping with sweat from the effort before. When they had followed the road for half an hour Terry suddenly stopped and pointed.

– There's that shortcut that we took last time. Should we not take it again? We'll save at least an hour with it! Maybe even two!

– Are you crazy? Vincent said. Let's take the road around the mountain instead! You must surely understand that Ashley don't have a chance to make it on the shortcut?

– Why not? I don't see the problem! It's a bit steep and so, but she will handle it. The question is rather whether Josephine can handle it.

Terry and Vincent argued back and forth if they would take the shortcut or not. Finally, Ashley got tired listening and took off up the narrow, steep trail. Terry hurried after her and after a brief hesitation Vincent and Josephine followed them. Soon, the path indeed became very steep and Ashley got really make an effort to come up. She grabbed the wheels far down and as lifted the wheelchair up the path. At the same time, the became even more narrow and winding, and with much more rocks and potholes.

She sweated and struggled but refused to give up. Terry walked behind her and chatted as if they were on a country road. Ashley began to feel a bit irritation. Didn't he notice how hard it was for her? Yes, he realized that it was difficult but kept it in silence. But he stayed close behind her, ready to catch her if she fell or rolled backwards.

But she fought on and they came higher and higher. Eventually they reached a very narrow passage between two large rocks. She tried to get through, but she soon realized it was impossible to fit the wheelchair.

– Terry, can you help me out a little here? Just past these rocks.

– Sure. But I might as well carry you up to the bushes up there, for there is gravel road again.

So Terry lifted her up and carried her up to the road. Then he got the wheelchair and lifted it up to the road, too. Ashley thanked him and then they looked down the trail for the others. After a while they saw how Vincent more or less pulled Josephine up the path by holding her arm. Her face was purple red of equal parts exertion and anger over how hard it was. When they also reached the rocks, Terry went down to assist on lifting Josephine up the final part.

– So now it's no more then maximum half an hour remaining, Vincent said.

– It doesn't matter. I will sit here and rest for at least an hour, Josephine groaned. I'm exhausted! This shortcut was a big mistake!

– You can rest in my lap, if you want, Ashley said.

It felt more comfortable than to sit on the ground, so she sat down in Ashley's lap. As soon as she sat down, Ashley took off up the dirt road. Vincent looked in surprise on Terry and then followed the girls. She kept quite high speed even though it was still quite steep, so soon as they arrived at the cottage. Josephine thanked and sat down on the porch waiting for the guys who had fallen behind. When Terry and Vincent finally arrived Ashley was gone.

– Where is Ashley? Terry asked to Josephine.

– I don't know, she disappeared down the lake, I think.

Just then they heard a loud splashing sound from the lake. Terry turned pale and ran down to the pier. There he found Ashley's empty wheelchair, and he got bad feelings.

– Come into the water your bath coward, Ashley shouted. It's wonderfully nice and cool!

Then he caught sight of her as she swam around in the water like a dolphin. Terry didn't hesitate long, but soon he also lay in the water and were playing and fooling around with Ashley. After a while they returned to the cabin and Ashley helped enthusiastically to chop woods that they needed for the stove. She had never done that before so Terry showed her technique. Soon, the guys had started the fire in the wood stove and Ashley started cooking while Josephine made the table. After the food they was all so exhausted that they went to bed to sleep.

Early next morning, just before the sun went up, Ashley was awaken by Terry. By his suggestion they sneaked out of the house and down to the lake. Ashley jumped out from the chair and then laid herself down next to Terry behind some underbrush. Soon, the sun rose and Ashley saw a several animals that went down to the water to drink. It was such an amazing sight that she was just mesmerized. They lay still and silent for an hour and just enjoyed the peacefulness, animals, sunrise and each others company. Terry then went and got a couple of fishing rods and soon they sat on one stone each, fishing for breakfast. It was biting pretty well and Ashley had never been so relaxed before in her entire life.

When they felt they had enough fish they returned to the cottage. The other two sleepy heads was still asleep, so Ashley fried the fishes after Terry had cleaned them. The smell of food caused the two sleepy heads to wake up and soon they all four and sat around the table enjoying eating fish for breakfast.

After the food Terry and Ashley left the other two with the dishes and took off into the woods to pick berries and mushrooms. They didn't get very much, but it was still fun, she felt. Terry still ignored that she was in a wheelchair and let her to get around the best she could. It went better than she had imagined possible, thanks to that she has been so strong in her upper body.

The weekend passed too quickly according to Ashley's opinion. They walked around in the woods, fished from the boat that was there or just lay in the grass listening to the sounds from the nature. Ashley had never lived so close to nature before, but really enjoyed it. When they were out in the boat she helped to row it and also helped with everything else, she was constantly around to assist. Josephine was

not at all fond of living so primitively so she mostly just cuddled with Vincent inside the cottage. Ashley let them be as it was obvious that Josephine wanted it.

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When they finally got home, she rolled into the kitchen where her mother was washing up and said with a serious facial expression:

– Mom, we have to talk seriously. Now.

– Oh, hello darling, you're home now? Was it nice? What do you mean that we need to talk? Please don't say the something bad happened!

– We need to talk about my depression. Something big has happened with it. And everything because of Terry and what he has done during this trip.

Judith looked anxiously at her, took off her apron and sat across from her at the table.

– Oh my God, what's he's done with you, you poor thing?

– Well, you know I've felt down since the summer, I have told you that. There's three things that have made me feel depressed and suicidal again. First, because I can't have fun anymore, because of the wheelchair. Secondly because the wheelchair make it impossible for me to get any real boyfriend. But above all, I have always said that the day will come when I notice that life can't get better, I reached my limit. I'm there now, Mom.

– Oh, please. You're so resourceful, aren't you? You can do anything! Come on, darling, Don't be discouraged again!

– Like this trip. It was absolutely impossible to just get up to that cottage in a wheelchair, but Terry doesn't even notice the wheelchair and can't believe there are things that are impossible to do with it.

– But is not it a good thing, anyway? Terry didn't care about the wheelchair?

– Sure, sure. But I still got to give up in the end. I just could not do it, but Terry was forced to help me. But you know what? Josephine managed even less! So now

suddenly I realize that I can do as much, if not more, than others can do. Everyone has a limit, right?

– Yes, that's true. I can't myself do everything I want.

– Then Terry have shown that there is at least one man who desires me as a woman, despite the wheelchair. He doesn't care at all about the wheelchair, but could not keep his hands off me. Or eyes, for that matter. We have really come close to each other during this weekend.

– You lost your virginity in the cabin, didn't you?

Ashley jumped and got all red in her face.

– Ohh, I don't think I want to answer that question. But finally, the most important, it's that what I have done during this week was so much fun. Watching the wildlife, berry picking, living primitively, everything. I don't think I've ever had so much fun. Terry and I have already decided that we will go hiking in the mountains next summer. Like, we just take a backpack each and live for a few weeks of what nature can give and sleep in tents. I'm really looking forward to it. And I'm not the least bit afraid that I will not manage to do it!

– But, what then is the problem?

– The problem? Nothing at all. My suicidality has now landed at zero and my depression is gone forever! Can you believe it? Terry has shown me that the wheelchair is not a problem for me anymore. All I want to do, I can!

– It sounds really good. Absolutely fantastic. Just wondering... no, same thing by the way.

– What, Mom? You must tell me what you're wondering. Don't forget our truth pact!

– Well, I just wonder what happens if Terry would dump you some day. Will you then fall back into the deep hole again?

– Well, if he would do that, I would surely cry for a week and be miserable even longer. But not become depressed. He has proved that I can have fun, and can love and be loved. No one can take that away from me. So don't worry, Mom.

The crisis that started with a knife in my back has ended now. For good. Believe me.

– It's the best thing I've heard in over three years. You make me so happy!

– Same here, Mom. Same here!

Judith went back to the counter, humming on one of Lisa's songs to Ashley's delight. Ashley took her phone out of her pocket.

– Hello, Amy. Don't you want to go out with me tonight checking out guys? You can bring your guy and I mine so we have some real men, we can check out!

Amy laughed happily and soon the two friends strolled the down street the same way as before, but this time both had a boyfriend on their arms. Ashley looked really happy at last. Now nothing could get her out of balance anymore!



# Epilogue

The relationship with Terry lasted all the time in the university, which Ashley passed with flying colors. She secured a job as a psychologist by using her own problems to help others. Because she had been both depressed and suicidal she automatically had credibility with her patients that other psychologists could only dream of. She also used herself as living proof that it's possible to get out of depression and be happy again.

She became really happy the day that Terry proposed to her. Her mother went on with enthusiasm in order to plan their wedding, and Ashley let her to that. Judith's relationship with Jimmy on the other hand, didn't work out. Pushed on on by her daughter, she went out on dates, too, and she soon found happiness herself with a new boyfriend. Joel married his Sonja and became happy, too.

There were days when Ashley was in her and Terry's new apartment and thought back on everything that happened to her. Somehow she had found a meaning to all the terrible things that happened in her life; to use them to help others to feel better.

When she finally got pregnant it was utter happiness for her and the depression was crushed for good.