

## A Million Pieces

I watch as a million little snowflakes so small you couldn't even tell them apart from snow, gently fall from the sky. I love this time of year, when Mom plays Christmas music on our tattered radio in the kitchen. And when every house in our neighborhood twinkles with fairy lights after night falls. Everything is peaceful and serene, just the way I like it.

"Lyra?"

I snap out of my thoughts and turn my attention to Mom.

"What do you say about heading to Grandpa's house for lunch? Grandma said he just set up an ice rink in the backyard!"

My little sister, Ava, squeals in the seat next to me.

"Oh can we!? That's gonna be so much fun! I can even bring Stella to skate too!"

She squeals again.

"Sure!" I agree.

We told Ava we were going to Bruno's Italian for lunch, but we had been planning to go to Grandma and Grandpa's house this whole time.

"Oh oh oh! And we can have my cake and sing happy birthday to me with Grandma and Grandpa in the backyard!!" Ava adds, thrilled with the idea of eating cake in the snow.

I smile with my sister; she's going to be SO surprised when I give her her present. Mom and Dad agreed that it's time we get Ava a real puppy. Not the stuffed one she calls Stella. I can't wait to show her the furry little Maltese waiting for her at Grandma and Grandpa's house!

Mom winks at me in the back seat and I wink back. Mom is just as excited about the new puppy as I am. We're already discussing names, even though Ava gets the final say. Mom turns her head back to the road and I do the same. As I stare out the car window, I think of what the day will be like.

I'm watching the clouds move closer together when I hear Ava start humming the theme song to her favorite tv show. I turn my head away from the scenery and grin at her, then at Mom as she's driving. I notice how her cheeks are flushed from the cold and her blond hair glows against the white sky outside. She glances at Dad in the seat in front of me and he looks back at her with a warm smile that makes his eyes crinkle.

Grandma says I'm a spitting image of my dad; with our dark brown hair and apple green eyes, I can see how people say we're alike. My little sister, Ava, however, looks more like my mom. She has golden blond hair and dimpled cheeks. She's turning seven today, and she can't wait to tell people that she's just as mature as me. Even though we're 7 years apart.

I smile to myself and shift my head back to the window. I notice that the snowfall got heavier. The ground is now covered in a thick blanket of white. It feels as if we are driving through a winter wonderland. Our car turns cautiously through a small road between a forest of pine trees as we head closer to Grandma and Grandpa's house. The fresh smell of pine fills my nose and reminds me of Christmas morning. I'm imagining myself rushing down the stairs to see the Christmas tree with Ava right behind me when my eyes open wide in shock.

A silver pickup truck veers straight towards us, picking up pace as it slides across the icy road. I have just enough time to suck in another breath before my vision goes black and I can feel too much then nothing. At. All.

~

*Breathe.* My body is an inferno. Everything is burning; it feels as if I'm surrounded in a cloud of fire. The air smells like gasoline and smoke and I choke as I try to inhale oxygen. The ringing in my ears gets louder until it consumes my head, and I think I might explode. I can't think straight. I don't understand what's happening. I feel so tired, just pushing air through my lungs takes too much effort. I want to go to sleep and never wake up.

~

When I open my eyes, my body is left freezing and numb in the snow. I can vaguely remember the screeching of tires and the strong smell of smoke and gasoline. My body aches, but I push myself up into a sitting position anyway. I immediately regret it as my head spins and I throw up onto the road beneath me.

As I sputter and cough, I notice a glimmer out of the corner of my eye. All around me, pressed into the snowy road, are millions of shards of glass. At first glance, they seem like delicate crystals made of ice. But when I pick one up with my hand, it slices a painful gash into my palm. I immediately drop the glass shard and cradle my injured palm. Then, all at once, a sound startles me. A chorus of sirens grows louder as they come closer and closer to where I'm sitting.

It's like a switch flips in my brain as I realize what just happened. My eyes dart to the chaos going on around me that I was oblivious to before. Multiple strangers pace frantically around the crash with phones pressed to their ears. Cars line up the side of the small road and even more people pile on to the ground to see what happened. Numerous amounts of police cars and ambulances make their way to the scene, and paramedics start rushing out by the dozen. There's black smoke billowing up to the sky from our crunched up car in the middle of the road. Right next to it I can see the silver pick up truck that hit us. It's front is badly damaged and it looks like the driver is in bad shape too. Panic starts to arise in my throat as I realize I wasn't the only person in the crash. *Where are Mom and Dad? Where's Ava?*

I jump up frantically to search for my family. It takes a lot of effort and my body aches from the movement, but I shove it past me and keep going. I *need* to find Ava. I'm her big sister; it's my job to protect her. She must be so scared. I drag myself closer to the crash which was about 50 meters away from where I woke up. I notice a couple stop and stare at me like they've just seen a ghost. But I don't care. Ava is my priority. I can see a few paramedics jogging toward me with worried looks on their faces. But I don't stop. I have a mission. My eyes dart around me for my little sister, but I don't see her. I step on something soft and look down at my feet. Fear floods my veins.

Ava's stuffed puppy lies tattered and gray beneath my feet. I pick up the stuffed toy and hold it to my chest. Tears leak from my eyes and pour down my cheeks. That's when I see a small blond head being rushed into the back of an ambulance. Her eyes are shut and her face is placid against the stretcher. Paramedics shout at each other as they pile in the back of the truck and rush her farther away from where I'm standing. I want to scream after them and beg them to let me go with her, but it's too late. I drop to my knees and stare at the place where my little sister just was. I feel like I've failed.

Arms grab at my shoulders and I don't fight them. My entire body feels numb and broken. My little sister- the one person I was supposed to protect- is unconscious and in the back of an ambulance. I still have no idea where my parents are. Or if they're ok. I feel so lost and afraid, that I just let myself be carried by the arms of a paramedic. I feel myself being put on a stretcher and I tune out the loud voices and sounds and let myself fall asleep. Then maybe I can wake up and this day will have never happened.

I open my eyes to the sound of a phone ringing and a monitor chattering steadily. My head feels fuzzy and my body feels weak. Other than that, I feel okay. It takes me less than a second to remember everything that happened and as soon as I do, I feel an ache in my chest.

On the opposite wall of my bed, there's a clock. It's about eight the morning- almost a day after the crash. I look to my right where there's a small nightstand near my head. On it, there's a pink balloon held by a cherry lollipop and right next to it is Stella, Ava's stuffed puppy. I immediately grab the toy and hold it to me. It smells like smoke but it brings me comfort. A second later, a nurse wearing blue scrubs walks in.

"Hi dear, how ya feelin?" she croons with a heavy southern accent.

"Fine," I try to say, but it sounds more like a croak.

"Where are my parents and my sister?" I ask, before she can ask me more questions about how I'm feeling.

She glances nervously at the door and takes a hesitant step toward me.

“Right now, it’s important that you worry about you and getting yourself better, alright? Then later we can talk more about your family. Sound good?”

She checks my monitor with a quick look and turns away. I want to ask her more, but she walks out of my room so quickly I don’t get the chance.

An hour later, Grandma comes in and shuts the door quietly behind her. The look on her face makes me fill with dread. Her eyes are red and swollen with tears and her cheeks are blotchy and wet. I immediately know something’s wrong. My entire body tenses up as I prepare for what she’s going to say.

She walks closer to me and sits on the edge of my bed.

“Hey baby doll. How are you feeling? The doctor says everything’s ok, you just need to rest for a little while.”

I brush away her concerns. I need to know what happened to Mom and Dad and Ava and I know she has the answer.

“I’m fine, where are Mom and Dad? Is Ava ok?” I ask with a shaky voice.

Grandma sucks in an uneven breath and starts unsteadily, though I can tell she’s thought about what she’s going to say already.

“Your Mom and Dad are happy and safe now. They got really hurt during the accident and the doctors did their best to help them...”

She chokes on her words.

“...but they didn’t make it. I promise everything is going to be ok, Grandpa and I will look after you and your sister. Ava is still alive, she’s badly hurt- but she’s a fighter.”

Grandma stops talking and searches my face desperately for some sign of emotion. But it’s like I can’t feel. Every part of my body has gone numb and I am incapable of doing anything. It’s as if I’ve been crushed by a boulder. The weight pushing down on my chest is unbearable and I stay trapped beneath it for what feels like an eternity.

I’m staring at the clock on the opposite end of the room when suddenly, Grandma starts crying. Her shoulders shake up and down, and her hands are pressed tightly to her face. I’ve never seen her so upset before. She’s always been so tough and strong, it scares me to see her like this. I want to comfort her, but I can’t find it in me to move.

After a few minutes, Grandma straightens up and looks at me firm in the eyes with a whole new demeanor.

“Your sister needs you now more than ever, Lyra. I need to count on you to fight for her. To push yourself to keep on going; she needs you. She needs your strength. Please, tell me you can do that for me?”

Grandma locks her eyes with mine and somehow it’s like I can breathe again.

“Of course,” I say in a faint whisper.

I’d do anything for my sister; I’m not about to give up.

Grandma nods and smiles faintly at me. She squeezes my knee and leaves the room. After she’s left, I hold Stella tighter to me and think about my little sister.

I think about what we were supposed to do today-or yesterday according the clock on the wall of my room. It was Ava’s seventh birthday. We were all so excited, I was going to give Ava her new puppy. And then she would smile and jump up and down and do her happy dance, which consists of two twirls and a shimmy.

I can feel the tears start to pour from eyes, but I keep thinking of how it was before. The memories make me stronger.

After I gave Ava her puppy, we would have gone to the backyard and skated on the ice rink Grandpa makes for us every Christmas. Grandma would come out and sit on the garden chairs and talk with Mom. They always laughed a lot when they talked. Dad laughed too.

He liked to grill with Grandpa; I once dared him to wear a Santa hat while grilling a steak and now it’s one of our traditions. It always makes Mom and me laugh.

Ava and I would help Grandpa bake cookies too. Grandpa’s really good at cooking and we always make the best cookies. One of my favorite memories was when Dad insisted he could make a better chocolate chip cookie than Grandpa. But when he went to add the flour to the mixer, it exploded and made a huge cloud of flour everywhere. He looked like the abominable snowman! I laughed so hard and Ava giggled until she was on the floor. Grandpa couldn’t help but laugh too, and then everyone was cracking up together, including Dad. I sigh and turn my face into my pillow. I miss them so much it hurts.

I close my eyes and remember all of the times with my family, the good and the bad. I let myself relax and fall asleep. And for the first time in almost two days, I feel at peace.

When I wake up from my nap it's midnight. I turn myself the opposite way so that I'm looking out the window. It takes up the entire wall so I have a full view of the city. The sky is pitch black outside, but it is alive with lights and color. Every building is strung with twinkling Christmas lights of all colors and sizes. Snowflakes fall gently to the rooftops, so small you couldn't even tell them apart from snow. The moon is full and luminous and the stars are as bright as the buildings themselves. I've always loved the stars. No matter how lost you are, they will always find you. The snow and the stars calm me and help me feel safe.

Staring at the city, I find myself thinking about what Grandma told me earlier. I need to be strong now. Mom and Dad are gone forever. It's just me and Ava. Grandma and Grandpa will look after us, but they're old, and will only get older. It's up to me to look after my little sister. But I don't feel scared- I feel a new strength in me that I've never felt before. I know that Ava and I are going to be ok. I know that when I finally see her tomorrow, I will be brave. I look deeply into the snowy sky and at the brightest star in the night, and I make a promise to myself and my sister.

*I'm going to fight for us, every second of every day. I will pick up the pieces, all one million of them. And put them back together.*