



teen zine

fall 2016

Table of Contents:

Cover photo – Rachel Miller

Freak Show (part 3) – Melanie Andersen

Now You See Him (part 1) – Taylor Bradley

Photos – Rachel Miller

He Who Ruled My Life – Sam Andersen

Bite Marks and Bullet Holes (part 1) – Gecko

Peter and the Lost Girl (part 1) – Rachel Miller

Drawings – Hannah Bradley

Freak Show: Chapter 3 – by Melanie Andersen

It's dark for a long time, so long that I half-believe I'm dead until I hear voices whispering among themselves. If I feign unconsciousness, I could probably eavesdrop awhile, and so I try to still my body, but steady my breathing.

"Well, what now?" a shaky voice asks, to which a slur of options were offered.

"We can still toss him out. All in favor say ay."

"Maybe it'd be better to just...dispose of him."

"No! Don't hurt him! Can I at least say hello?" Leon's familiar voice asks.

"You know how dangerous that is. We can't let him know us. Maybe we could just tell him he needs to leave and never come back."

"And then?"

"Then we move."

My eyes shoot open and I sit up. "Move where?" I demand, turning towards the voices. Everyone is stunned, including me, as we slowly start to process just what we got into.

Imagine finding a rag doll with all of its stuffing ripped out, missing an eye, and with tears in its limbs, and then instead of fixing the doll, you just sew on extra body parts until you're left with something that's scarcely recognizable as a doll in the first place. And then imagine you found a handful of these, and they're all as horrifyingly distorted as the next. And that they're standing in front of you.

"Ah, so you *weren't* unconscious long."

A creature with a sharp jawline and fierce eyes the color of precious gold smirks at me, tilting his head slightly forward. Two large, almost fake-looking bull horns jut out from his mop of blond hair and he leans even closer towards me, daring me to call him out on it. His dried, cracked lips are stained with droplets of blood that he occasionally runs his tongue over, no doubt tasting a memory that was never supposed to happen, and his intense stare never wavers as he waits for my response.

But despite my growing fear and unease, I just look down at the floor, and so a gruff voice answers for me, "Of course he wasn't unconscious long. He bumped his head on a table, not a mallet. And now that he's up, he can leave."

I look up only to find out that the voice belongs to the leftmost one of three heads connected to a single, Frankenstein-like body. It is made up of a girl's torso and head in the middle, the right half of a boy stitched on the right and the left half of a different boy stitched on the left. Their shoulders have been enlarged so their faces don't bump into each other, and this confusing mess of body parts leaves my head spinning and my stomach twisting. A horrified cry almost escapes my throat but I cover my hand with my mouth before it does.

"You heard him. Get out," the bull orders, pointing down the tunnel. I shake my head but can't say anything.

"Wait, let me say goodbye first," Leon requests, taking a step forward to better see me.

"No. He's leaving."

And without another word, the bull pulls me up and keeps a dangerously strong hold of my arm as he shoves past the horde of people I still can't entirely see due to the poor lighting. As he leads me through the living room, I feel my head pounding. I can't just *leave* them, and I certainly can't forget about them. Just ignore a group of mutated children hiding in a tunnel in the woods?

So I break away from the bull, turn around and shout, "I want to help you!"

The bull grabs hold of my arm again and seethes, "You listen to me, *Kian*, we don't need anything from you-"

"Tyson, wait!" Leon shouts, racing into the room and waving his arms. "Let me ask him one thing!"

When he's in front of me, he gazes up into my eyes as if I were the most fascinating, generous person he's ever seen.

"*Kian*," he quietly whispers, so that Tyson won't hear him. "Why do you get a mom?"

Why do you get a mom?

"She was taking you home, wasn't she? And then she almost ran me over, but if I had one she would protect me from getting killed by other moms. So why don't I get one?"

I feel a knot in my throat. This boy, this young boy who I don't really know at all, has grown on me in the shortest amount of time, more than anybody else in my life. I haven't had a new friend for years, and this is the closest I've ever gotten.

"I don't know," I reply, bending down to his height. "I'm sorry."

"Me, too," he nods, then looks up at Tyson, seemingly grateful he let us talk. And then he walks away.

With Leon gone, Tyson ushers me back up the mound of dirt that leads to the exit hole, and so I go on my hands and knees and start climbing up.

"Wait just one second," he orders, so I stop what I'm doing and turn around. "I want to get something clear with you. I know that it'd take a will of titanium to just walk in here and walk out and never come back, never talk about us again. I know we entertain people. I know we're funny to look at. I know that finding a bunch of God's rejects is probably the best thing to ever happen in your sorry life, but I need something from you before I can let you go."

I stare curiously at Tyson, and he rolls up the sleeves of his dirty white shirt before continuing.

"You're not gonna come in here ever again. You're going to leave us alone. Because if I find you in here ever again..." He throws a glance back over his shoulder, though I can't imagine what he's looking at as it's almost impossible to see down here. "...let's just say, you're going to be unconscious a lot longer."

His golden eyes practically glow in the dark, and in them I see just how serious he is. But I also see something else - a flash of concern, worry over the others. His rolled-up sleeves expose arms that have no muscle and are covered with scratches, but I know he's trying to scare me off. He's trying to intimidate me so I never bother him and the other children again.

I nod. I won't come in here again unless you want me to."

"Doubtful," he replies, and then I continue crawling up the mound, out the hole, and eventually out of the woods.

* * *

"No, thank you, Mrs. Low. Though I appreciate your offer, I'm not exactly keen on accepting other people's candles. Really though, thank you," Annette says, taking a seat on our green couch. Mom has recently taken up a new hobby - candle-making, of all things - and now she's intent on giving one to anybody she can find. She keeps telling me that once she gets good at making candles, she'll teach me to do it, and it can become a mother-son project that we can bond over. Except she's fairly busy with her job, writing articles for our local newspaper, and since she spends all her spare time practicing her candle-making technique, she hasn't been talking to me much lately, which kind of defeats the purpose.

"Ah, for some reason I can't find *anyone* to take my candles. Do they-" Mom holds up a candle to her eyes, peers at it "-look a little funny to you?"

Of course not! It's very pretty, Mrs. Low. I just didn't bring my bag, so I'd have to carry it home, is all," she lies.

Though Annette is one of the sweetest girls I've ever met, not that I've really met a lot, she's a great liar. It's not that she lies to take advantage of people; usually her intentions are pure, for the benefit of others. Nevertheless, that girl can lie to anyone about anything and has been since she used to babysit me when I was eleven, after Jason died. Right after the accident, Mom tried to stay active in the community and kept going about her daily life, almost in denial about what happened, so she'd leave me at home with Annette, even though she's only three years older than me. Annette became one of my only friends, and likewise, my only crush, until Mom finally collapsed upon herself a couple months later, fired her, and then never left the house because she was always too busy "writing articles."

And even though Annette and I wave whenever we see each other, that's pretty much been our only contact since, aside from the occasional run-in at school. But I *had* to invite her over, because this is important.

"Mom," I start, sitting down on the couch next to Annette, "can you leave us alone, please?"

Mom nods and quietly walks down the hall to her bedroom, still eyeing the candle. When she shuts her door, I let out my breath. I hadn't even been aware I was holding it.

"So, what's up, Kian? It's been awhile since we've talked," Annette says, giving me a small smile that gets me a bit flustered. Annette has this way of eye-smiling that I've always loved; her hazel eyes shimmer as the corners curl up the way people's mouths usually do, but you can always tell if her smiles are sincere, depending on the sparkle in her eyes.

"Yeah, it's been some time," I answer, hoping to get to the point. "I need your help with something though."

"Oh?"

"Well, you know how you work with plants?" I forget how bad I am at this whole "socializing" thing, because *of course* she knows she works with plants. "Anyways, I was hoping you might know something about the plants in the woods around here. Like, which ones are edible, and can help with bug bites, and stuff like that."

She shrugs. "Okay, well I'm no botanist. I'll tell you that right off the bat. But I'm sure we can stop by the shop and I can pick up some of my booklets. There's one about the local foliage," she informs.

"Really? That's great!" I stand up, heading down the hall to the front door. Annette follows me, but points to my mother's bedroom before I open the door.

"Don't you want to tell her where we're going?" she asks. I stare at her door awhile.

"No."

And then Annette drives me to the flower shop without another word.

* * *

It's a funny thing, since I've watched Annette set up vibrant displays in the windows and hold open doors for the elderly here for over two years now, that I haven't ever been inside. There was really no need for my family to have flowers, since we had our own small garden in our backyard until dad and Jason died, and even after that there was little reason to have perky flowers. I mean, most people might give them to their moms on Mother's Day, but it would be different if I did it.

Here, Mom, take these flowers. We used to grow them in our backyard before you shut yourself off from the world completely.

Thanks, son! By the way, I'm giving you up for adoption.

"Okay, I got something," Annette states, ripping me away from my thoughts. She holds out *Our Native Foliage*, a pamphlet with curled edges, and a thin book called *The Survivalist's Guide to Plants*. I take them from her with a smile.

"Thanks, Annette."

She eye-smiles back and points her index finger at the pamphlet. "Linda typed that one up," she informs, "so it's pretty accurate, but brief. It just gives a very basic description of the plants in the woods. I thought the book could help you a bit with the finer details, but not all of the ones in the book can be found in the woods."

Linda is Annette's sixty-year-old boss. She bought the shop way back when she was twenty-two and kept it running all these years, even after her husband died from cancer. Linda knows pretty much everything there is to know about plants, and she always maintains a cheerful disposition. Sometimes I wish my own mother were more like her, because even when you lose someone, it doesn't give you a right to abandon the people you have left.

"Thanks," I repeat, tucking the pamphlet and book in my pocket. "You have no idea how much you've helped."

Annette laughs and tucks a strand of shiny brown hair behind her ear. "No problem. If you want, there's some more pamphlets and books up near the front of the shop, in the magazine rack. And the library might have something."

"Okay," I nod, "Than--"

Annette holds up her hand. "No need to thank me. It's nothing, really. I just wanted to ask...what do you need all this information for, anyway?"

"Research," I answer immediately, and she raises her left eyebrow.

"It's summer."

"Research for camping. I'm going camping."

"Since when do you research for camping? You go camping all the time," Annette states, giving me a skeptical look. "Are you not going to tell me the real reason?"

I stare at her long and hard, contemplating. Sure, she might be able to help, but you don't just go around informing people that there are mutated children hiding out in the woods. And Annette, being responsible, would probably tell an adult what was going on and God knows what would happen to them then. So I shake my head.

"No," I answer, "I can't tell you."

She looks genuinely surprised at my answer. And her eyes, the only gateway to her emotions, convey more than just her skepticism of me - they seem downright distrustful. Maybe I should have just insisted it was for camping purposes.

"Well," she laughs bitterly, "I hope you're not planning on poisoning anyone."

It always takes me by surprise when I realize just how little people know me. Mom and Annette, the only people I really talk to, still somehow only manage to be ghosts to me. I know they're there, they know I am, but we never really see each other for who we really are, nothing more than just an illusion of a person who once was. It's comments like these that make me feel like a gust of wind rather than a human being.

And so I turn away from Annette and head for the door.

"You either."

Then I walk away, heading straight for the woods without looking back and without an explanation.

The air is crisp today, and it has a slight chill to it because thick, gray clouds are covering up the scorching summer sun, so when I weave my way into the deep mass of overgrown roots and tangled ivy, the shade provided by the trees almost makes me wish I'd brought a light jacket. I bet the kids don't have jackets. They'd probably like them.

I feel the familiar tug at my heart whenever I think about the still mostly-unidentified group of people I barged in on yesterday. It's not exactly the nice, fuzzy-feeling kind of tug that you get when you think about your crush, or when you watch your child play innocently outside, either. It's the kind of tug that makes you wonder what might happen if you don't step in. Would these kids last long on their own? If they die, would it partly be your fault? Do they ever feel so cold they want to set themselves on fire? Do they ever feel so thirsty they drink their own urine? Do they ever feel so starved that they think about cutting off their own leg and eating it?

And that very tug, that unbearable tug that drags my thoughts to the darkest crevices of my mind is the reason I am now frantically scribbling a note on the inside cover of *The Survivalist's Guide to Plants* using a pen from the pocket of my shorts.

I'm kneeling down a few feet away from the boulder that disguises the entrance to their hideout and using my knee as a hard surface so that I can imprint my message on the soft cover of the book. When I'm done, I place it and the pamphlet on top of the boulder and, against good judgment, I knock on the rock a couple of times to ensure that they come out and look at it later.

Then I dart for the trees as fast as I can.

* * *

Rosalie abruptly rises from her spot crouched in the corner with me and Skylar, and Tyson shoots her a contemptuous glare.

"What are you doing?" he scolds in a tight whisper. "Sit back down. The Triplets and I will protect you."

"I can protect us just as well as you!" Rosalie hisses, taking a defiant step forwards. Then she lowers her voice. "I am not exactly excited we are in this situation, and I'm a little frightened, too, but us huddling for hours in the corner is scaring Skylar."

Skylar is sobbing and shaking violently next to me, trying to soothe herself by rocking back and forth. She was doing that all night after Kian left, and when she finally calmed down in the morning, we heard footsteps and that horrifying knocking sound, and she has been like this since.

"Fine!" he barks, causing Skylar to cry even harder due to his harsh tone.

After realizing he scared her, Tyson crawls towards her and scoops her up into his arms. He's the only one she lets touch her. "Shhh..." he whispers, kissing her lightly on the forehead. "I'm sorry for yelling. It's okay."

Rosalie stares blankly at the two rocking together, for a beat, then looks away.

Now You See Him, Part 1 – by Taylor Bradley

Stick to your story. Just keep calm, stick to your story, and you're off the hook.

Remember: Liam came up to you and got up in your face. You told him to back off, but he wouldn't listen. Next thing you knew, he was pushing you up against the lockers, and he threw the first punch, which is how you got your black eye. You were fighting out of self-defense. Self-Defense.

The whole car jumps, causing me to whack my head on the door. I groan quietly, and dare to look over at Mom. She's tense, and her eyes look like they're about to catch fire. Yup. She's mad. And she has good reason to be, but I wish she wouldn't get her anger out by driving really fast over all the speed-bumps. After a minute, I work up the courage to talk to her.

"Mom?"

She speeds up a little bit, and makes a pretty wide turn.

"Can you slow down just a little? I think I hear the acceleration pedal screaming bloody murder."

That's her weakness. She loves to laugh, and I'm just the man for the job. But not a single muscle in her face moves. Not even a smirk. She's not just mad. She's furious.

I decide to just keep staring out the window, and let her cool off. God knows I'm gonna get a huge lecture when we get home, so I might as well enjoy the quiet now.

I kind of tune out, and before I know it, the car rumbles into the driveway. Mom practically strangles the gear shift as the engine smoothly dies out. Just take off your seatbelt, and slowly get out. Hide in your room until dinner, pretend to do some homework, and by then, she'll be her normal self. Well, as normal as anyone in my family can be.

Belt off. Grab the door handle.

"Don't even try."

...Busted.

Her tone tells me I should listen. She has a voice that's usually so happy and light, but that sounded like she was gargling nails or something. For some reason, Mom can't seem to look at me. It's as if my face will make her want to scream. *Or maybe she's just waiting for her heat vision to kick in so she can turn me into a puddle.*

She stares at her faint reflection in the windshield and drums her left hand on the steering wheel for a few minutes before finally speaking. "Why do you do this?"

Storytelling time. "Alright, I know this looks bad, but it wasn't my fault."

"Your school dean seemed to think otherwise." She still hasn't faced me.

"See, what happened was, I was putting my math book in my locker, when this big gorilla of a guy, Liam, comes up to me and gets in my face, right? So I tell him, 'Dude, back off,' but he keeps ripping into me. One thing leads to another, and before I know it, Liam—"

"I don't care what Liam did!" Her head turns like an owl's. Her skin is sort of pinkish, and a few strands of her dark brown, wavy hair is in her face. "I know what happened! Your dean told me! I saw the kid you were fighting with come out of the office, remember? You did quite a number on him! But I didn't ask you what happened, or how much of an ape this guy looked like, or how he was antagonizing you!"

She stares at me for what feels like an hour, her tired green eyes burning into my blue ones. They close, and she lets out an exhausted sigh. "I asked you why. Why *you*, Griffin Jackson Cunningham," *Darn. Full name.* "did what you did. Why you have this, this...*need* to just be...difficult."

That last word makes my blood boil. *It's like she thinks I wanted to do it.* "Hey, I was defending myself! He hit me first!"

"Oh, Griffin, don't play that with me. Not again. You're acting like this is the first time this has happened! You are a *magnet* for trouble, lately. Not two weeks ago, I had to come pick you up because you had to serve detention! *Again!*"

"Oh, well excuse me if that made things *difficult*, Mom."

"You've been doing this ever since your father and I got a divorce! Six years ago, you weren't like this at all! You were great in school, and you loved learning, and all your teachers adored you. You helped out around the house, and you were *responsible*! What happened to you? Why are you doing this?"

I hate it when she brings this up. I look away and focus on the empty bird feeder in the front lawn. "I don't know."

"No, Griffin, *why*? Why do you have to, to, make the situation worse instead of trying to improve it? Why do you have to act out? Do you need more attention? Is that it? Do I not give you enough attention?"

"No."

"No, I *don't* give you enough attention?"

"No, that's not it."

"Then *what*? What is it? Please, enlighten me, because I don't know what to do anymore! I'm out of ideas! At the end of my rope! What do you want from me, Griffin?!"

"I don't know!"

"Then figure it out!" She keeps her eyes locked on me as she unclicks her seatbelt and throws it over her shoulder. "Because in case you forgot, I'm a sales representative, and my job makes me travel a lot! And in case you forgot, I have to go on a business trip *all of next week!*"

In case I forgot, of course... "What does that have to do with me?!"

"Oh, it's always about you, isn't it? Well, for your information, your usual babysitter, Mrs. Gunderson from down the street, *cancelled* due to a family emergency! So now I have to find a new sitter by Sunday! And on top of that, thanks to you, it has to be someone who can be here all day, because in case you didn't hear your dean, your little fight earned you a week long out-of-school *suspension*. You knew I was gonna be away, but you couldn't resist getting in trouble again. *That*, Griffin, is *exactly* what I mean when I say you make things difficult."

She slams the door, and walks into the house, where the dog is barking excitedly. *Everything is my fault in her mind! Yeah, Mom, I totally remembered your big trip, and, just to screw up your life, I made her to tick off one of the biggest guys in school, and get myself in trouble. Because that's what I live for: making things harder for everyone. As if! I got problems of my own, if she hasn't noticed. And how was I supposed to know the babysitter was gonna cancel. Why do we even need a babysitter, anyway? I mean, I'm sixteen! I can handle things around the house for a week! Why does she blame me for everything?!*

I finally get out of the car, grab my thousand pound backpack, and make my way up to the door. The dog is still barking up a storm. Before I can even get the door all the way open, she jumps on my legs, her floppy ears flying everywhere. *Why are dogs always so happy to see people all the time? I've only been gone for a few hours. Thanks to Liam, I didn't finish the school day. Our little "show" happened right before fifth period. At least I missed English class.*

I shut the door a little harder than usual. "Scout, get off," I tell the small cocker spaniel, who's still leaping up to my knee caps, trying to get attention. I'm not in the mood for playing."

She sits right in front of me, and beams at me with her soft, brown eyes. *She makes me feel so guilty when she does this. Here I am, telling a little puppy I'm too much of a jerk to play. This is a new low.* I finally give in, get down on my knees, and start petting her fluffy, golden fur. She starts making that happy whining noise that dogs make, and rolls onto her stomach. *Man, I love dogs. They make you forget the problems of life.*

"Zeke, giver her back!"

"Make me, squirt!"

"Mommy!"

Younger siblings, however, make sure to remind you.

Just as I'm getting up, Zeke runs unto the room, clutching a Barbie doll in his hand. As usual, Mary Jane is right behind him. "Griffin! Make him give my doll back!"

She just loves putting me in the middle. Zeke rockets past me, but I grab his arm before he can get too far. "Quit bein' a jerk, and just give her the stupid toy back."

"Finders keepers, bro! I told her to keep her junk out of my room!"

He tries to pull away from me, but his twelve-year-old muscles don't do a lot for him, really. I grab the doll easily, and toss it to my sister, finally letting go of Zeke's arm. He falls onto the carpet with a loud noise. "She's eight, Zeke," I explain, irritated. "Eight-year-olds leave stuff all around the house. Just suck it up already. Besides, your room's a mess, anyway."

"You're no Mr. Clean yourself, you know," he shoots back. After sticking his tongue out at me in a very mature way, he retreats back into the kitchen. I smirk a little when I hear Mary Jane murmur, "Butt face," when he passes her. She then turns her attention to me.

"Will you play dolls with me?"

"Can't," I tell her simply. "Homework."

She folds her arms across her chest and glares at me. "You're not gonna do it, anyway."

"Well, I have stuff to do."

"What stuff?"

"Teenage stuff little girls wouldn't understand."

"Liar, liar pants on fire. You're just gonna sit in your room and play video games till you fall asleep, like you always do."

"Like I said," I open the door to my bedroom and look at her one more time, "you wouldn't understand."

She stomps off with her Barbie and I seal myself in my room. To a teen, a bedroom is like another house you go to when you need to get away from the rest of your house. Or the other people who live there. The familiar smell of dirty laundry fills my nose as I make my way over to my bed, which I didn't bother to make. I click on the TV and fire up the ol' XBOX, like usual. *Thanks to that suspension, I have a whole week's worth of homework to do, most of which I don't even understand. Looks like I'm going to be my usual studious self...and save it till the last minute.*

While the game loads, I flip over and look up at the ceiling. *My family is nuts. Mom takes everything out on me, Zeke's a pain, and Mary Jane just needs to learn to leave me alone. I'm her brother, not her friend. When are they gonna figure it out?*

...In retrospect, I should probably put some ice on this black eye.

* * *

Saturday goes by quickly, like they all do. Before I know it, I hear that familiar knock.

"Griffin," Mary Jane calls, knowing better than to open the door. "It's dinner time."

So close! I was just about to totally own Halo 3! "Okay, be there in a sec."

"Mom got KFC," she says in a sing-song voice.

Mom didn't tell me she was going out. She usually tells me that sort of stuff. Then again, she's been kind of avoiding me all day. And hang on, Mom almost never gets take out. What's going on?

Oh, I know what this is. This is her way of saying she's sorry for going off on me yesterday. That's it. I bet I'll get the usual speech. "I'm sorry, Griffin, but you've really got to do better. I didn't mean to yell. I'm just really overwhelmed, what with work, and juggling everything with you kids, and such. Can you forgive me, and promise to try harder?"

Walking into the kitchen, the smell of chicken takes over, and I see everyone is in their spots at the table. Even Scout, who's sitting under Mary Jane's chair, waiting for her to "drop" some food. I sit down across from Mom, waiting for the inevitable to begin. We say grace, fill our plates, and then...silence.

I stare at mom for a few seconds while gnawing on a chicken leg. *Why isn't she saying anything? She usually clears the air right after grace. But she's not even looking at me. She's just...sitting there, poking her potatoes.*

Like nothing. Ever. Happened.

I wait a few minutes, and finish off my chicken and biscuit. This is really awkward. "Mooomm," Zeke's whiny voice breaks the quiet. "Mary Jane's giving Scout table food again."

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

Squish! Mom puts her hand into her potatoes – accidentally, I'm sure – and stands up, eyes shut tightly. Zeke and Mary Jane shut up, and we all look at her. Scout trots over and sits by Mom's leg, thinking she's going to get some of that chicken on her plate.

Mom opens her eyes, but seems very interested in the wood design on the table. "I've made a decision."

That's not how the "I'm sorry" speech goes!

"As the three of you know, Mrs. Gunderson can't watch you guys while I'm gone next week. So, I've had to find a new babysitter."

"Is it Griffin?" Zeke interrupts, "Cause, honestly, he kinda stinks at watching us."

"Hey!" I yell.

"Well, you *do*," Mary Jane says. "You don't do anything with us. You're just like, here to make sure nothing bad happens. You're boring."

"Yeah, at least Gunderson played checkers and told us stories."

"Let me finish," Mom orders. "So...even though I have mixed feelings about it..."

I take a long drink of water, knowing what's going to come. *C'mon, Mom, say it: "Griffin, the best babysitter ever, is going to watch you. He's so responsible, and I never should've yelled at him."*

"...Your father's coming to watch you while I'm gone."

"Mooomm, Griffin spit water all over the table!"

"Is he choking?"

"No, Mary Jane, sweetie. He's just being dramatic."

"*What?*" I shout. "But you...and Dad...he can't...you wouldn't...you're not..."

"Now he's babbling," Zeke observes, as I keep spouting out words, uncontrollably.

"You're not...Dad?...why can't you...can't Aunt Sheryl?!"

Mom has taken her seat and is finally starting to eat. "She's in Nevada."

"But, but, but..." Then suddenly, a lightbulb pops up over my head. "Oh, I get it." I lean back in my chair, confidently. "This is a joke. That was you getting your pound of flesh because of the suspension thing. Good one, Mom. You really had me going there for a minute."

...Why isn't she laughing?

"Mom," I lean back in, "that was a joke. Say it was a joke."

"You want me to lie to you?" she asks with a glob of potatoes stuck to her face.

"Mom?"

The silence returns.

Then it hits me: *This isn't an apology, or a joke, or some weird skit for a prank show...This is punishment. She's so mad at me, she's bringing in the person she knows I have issues with to watch me all week! No...NO!* "But you hate each other!"

"We do not *hate* each other, Griffin! In fact, even though our marriage didn't work out, we're still good friends!" She looks up at me, and starts counting on her fingers. "We talk once in awhile on the phone, we send birthday cards with cheesy, stupid jokes, and we send each other Christmas cards! Just like he mails you guys your holiday and birthday gifts, and calls you often!"

"But *some* of us choose not to talk to him," Zeke shoots, glaring at me.

I gotta find a way out of this. Stating the facts failed, so now it's time for bribery and begging. I reach across the table and take her hand – which is kind of hard since we're both sitting at the long end of the table. "Mom, I promise I won't get in trouble, or make things difficult for you anymore. I'll do my homework, help around the house, play with Mary Jane, walk the dog, whatever you need!"

"Great," she says, monotonically.

Victory!

"But your father's still coming."

"What?!"

"I called him last night, and he said he'd be more than happy to come and see you. He's really missed you three, you know."

"We miss him, too," Zeke puts in.

"Then why didn't he try to get visitation with us?!" I ask, heated.

Mom's quiet for a minute. She picks up her plate, pushes in her chair, and stares at the floor.

"Well...you can ask him when he gets here tomorrow morning."

* * *

She can't do this. She's bluffing! She wouldn't call Dad. He divorced her. And on top of that, he moved away, and didn't even ask to see us. He left Mom. He left us.

I glance at the clock for about the fiftieth time. It's 1:38 AM. I've been lying awake like this, driving myself crazy for hours. *It can't be true. He can't be coming. He wouldn't step foot here, not after leaving Mom.*

I start to doze a little, and memories begin to bubble to the front of my mind. Ones I've long suppressed:

Dad teaching me how to ride a bike. Running Dad's foot over several times with said bike. Making holiday cookies with both parents, and getting flour everywhere. Dad tucking me in at night. His magic tricks that he used to do. They used to amuse me so much as a little kid. They were simple things like, "Is this your card?", "I can link these paperclips together.", and "The Disappearing Quarter." I remember being so astounded by that one, blissfully ignorant of the fact that it was just up his sleeve. Funny...Dad kind of pulled his own disappearing act.

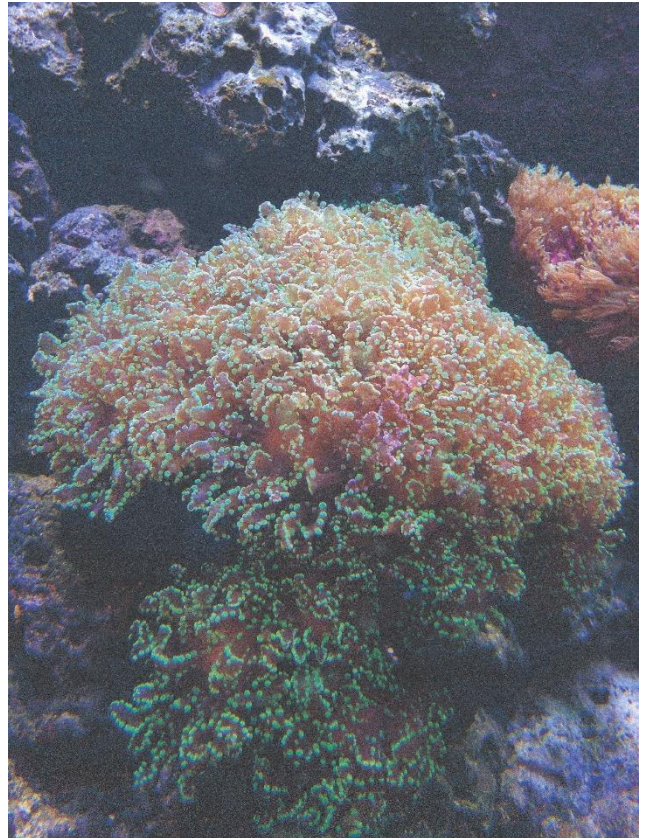
Sure, I remember the arguments they used to have in the kitchen. And I bet the word "divorce" was thrown around a lot. But...being ten...it was kind of like the world came crashing down in a second. Dad divorced Mom, and suddenly, POOF! Gone.

Now you see him...

Now you don't.



Photos, by Rachel Miller



He Who Ruled My Life – by Samantha Andersen

I hate Him. I hate Him so much. He has done nothing but tear my family apart. I remember my parents arguing late at night about Him. Mother pleading for His assistance while Father tried to work hard to impress Him. I never understood why our family was so dependent on Him. We never needed anyone before, but now it seemed without Him we wouldn't be able to survive.

Maybe we were always in His debt and I never knew before. Mother and Father never liked to talk about Him much and now I know why. He was vicious. He turned good, honest men evil. He played people, gave them a deceiving sense of comfort and security, but even in my younger years I knew He was not worth any of the high praise and value people bestowed upon Him.

Over the course of five years Mother and Father's arguments increased a great deal. They were now more frequent and hurtful. Eventually, they ended up divorcing and Mother remarried a businessman by the name of Robert. Robert was a quick-witted CEO who was also well-acquainted with Him. The Him I know Mother would have married if she could. Robert was just the closest she could get to the one she really wanted to marry, but couldn't.

Again, I never understood why people allowed Him to have this grasp over their lives. It was not until the end of my high school career that I finally began to see what made Him so amazing. He still possessed those dark qualities and admittedly, He still infuriated me at times, (I don't think I ever forgave Him for destroying my family nor will I ever) but after spending more time with Him I realized that He could be caring as well. He would help the less fortunate frequently and make people's dreams a living reality. It was moments like these that made me fall in love with Him.

I was in love with my enemy to a point where I became obsessed. I needed Him with me constantly and whenever He left me for someone else I became a wreck until He came back. Each time I would swallow my pride and continue to work my hardest in order to earn his affection once again.

Those moments when I would hold Him in my hands and He would assure me that everything was fine were the moments I lived for. He made me feel so secure I became blind to the dangers of the world. This was how I learned that His security was only a test. He left me as soon as I became frisky and impulsive, buying my weight in useless clothes and objects. He left me to learn my lesson and once I did, He returned, though not until after some hard work.

Then disaster struck. My car was involved in a terrible accident, sending me to the hospital for a week's stay. When I arrived back home He was gone. He abandoned me just when I needed Him the most. That was the turning point for me. It was then I remembered who I was before I got caught up in His charm and authority. The little girl I used to be came back and now holding Him in my trembling hands, I took away His power. He was, after all, only green paper. I could rip Him – no, rip *it* – into two, for I was the one with the power. Money would no longer rule my life.

Bite Marks and Bullet Holes, Part 1 – by Gecko

Chapter 1

“Run, run, Phoenix, get out of here!”

“No, I’m not leaving you.”

“Then you will die with them,” a terrible voice called from behind me as the cold barrel of a gun touched my skull.

“Ahh!” I screamed as I woke up in a cold sweat. I threw the covers off me and started pacing. It was the dream, the same dream that I had been having for two months now. Why was it always the same dream?

“Phoenix, are you ok?” my brother asked as he and a few more males crashed into my room. They looked ridiculous in their half-dressed states as they looked around my room for a threat.

“I’m fine, Axel. You guys can go back to bad,” I sigh out as I sit down on my bed.

The warriors bowed their heads in respect. I bowed in return and waved them off. The only one who didn’t leave was Axel. He stared at me with sad eyes and sat on the ground in front of me. “The same dream?” I nodded lightly and looked at my hands. “Have you been able to talk to your wolf yet?” I shook my head sadly. “Hey, look at me,” Axel said as he grabbed my hand. “Everything is going to be ok. I promise you.”

“Thank you, Axel,” I smiled as he stood up and reassuringly squeezed my hand as he helped me get back into bed. He tucked me in and walked out, softly closing the door behind him, leaving me with my thoughts.

I don’t know when I fell back asleep last night, but when I woke up the time on my alarm clock said 11:45. Hey, don’t judge. I love my sleep, and you have to admit that I deserve it.

Chapter 2

Ky’s POV

“Father, I still don’t understand. Why must we attack the Pearl Moon Pack?”

“Because they need to pay for what they did,” my father replied.

“But what did they do?” I asked again.

“NOTHING THAT CONCERNS YOU!” my father boomed, shaking the whole building and causing dust to fall from the ceiling.

With that, I left the room. I know better than to speak reason to him when he's in one of his rages. It was easier when my mother was here, but now no one can control him, mostly because when someone tries they usually end up in the ICU for a month, if they are lucky.

"I'm not even going to ask how the meeting went," my best friend and soon-to-be Beta, Tannis, said as I walked into the kitchen.

"Thanks," I replied. In all honesty, you would have needed to be about three pack territory lengths away not to have heard my father just now.

"Hey, you still getting those weird dreams?" Tannis asked, changing the subject.

I nodded as I sat down on a stool next to him. "It's so strange. I see her face, her smile. I hear her laughter and I feel complete."

"She must be your mate, man," Tannis said with a smile. "I'm still looking for mine."

"But that's the thing. I have no idea where she is."

"You'll find her. I know you will."

THIS IS YOUR ALPHA SPEAKING. ALL PACK WARRIORS PREPARE TO ATTACK AT DAWN

Well, that's that, I guess.

Chapter 3

Phoenix's POV

"Phoenix, what are you doing up at 11:45 at night?" Axel asked me as he walked into the kitchen.

"It's 11:45 at night?" I asked back, shocked.

"Yeah, after I left your room last night, I made sure that no one would bother you, and apparently you slept the whole day," he replied.

"Oh, wow," I said, as I started eating some cookies that the pack moms had made. "Well, I'll finish eating and head back to bed," I told Axel. He mumbled an "Ok" and headed back upstairs.

I don't know what happened after that. The next thing I knew we were under attack.

Chapter 4

Phoenix's POV

Alarms blasted throughout the pack house. Warriors and innocents alike ran around everywhere. As I got off the couch, I saw a small girl clutching a teddy bear and crying in the middle of the chaos. I ran over and picked her up and held her close.

"Mommy!" she cried into my shoulder. "Where's mommy?"

"Shhh, it's ok. We'll find her, ok?" I replied, rubbing circles on the toddler's back. I ran into the kitchen to see the island in the center of the room open as women and children were led down into the cellar for their protection.

"Angel!" called a heavily pregnant wolf as she came toward me.

"Mommy!" the girl said as she reached for her mother.

"Thank you for finding her," the woman said as she took the little girl's hand.

"Please, there is no need for you to thank me. You should head down into the cellars so you will be safe," I replied as I guided the woman to the steps. She nodded her head and started down the stairs. I waited until she was safely inside before inputting the code that closed the island.

"Phoenix, it's not safe for you out here. You should be in the cellar with the others," Axel said as he stormed into the kitchen.

"Oh, hell no. You, mom, and dad are risking your lives for the safety of this pack. I will not sit in a cellar knowing that I might be the difference between life or death," I said as I started grabbing weapons from the duffle bag that my brother had brought up.

"Fine, but stay by me," Axel said in defeat.

"Aye, aye, sir," I replied as I mock-saluted him.

"Anyway, have you seen Tina anywhere," he asked, looking worried.

"Aww, the big, bad Alpha is worried about his mate," I cooed at him.

"Phoenix, I'm not joking around," Axel replied.

"I know, I know. She's probably down in the cellar. You know how mom is," I replied as I strapped a shotgun around my back.

"Ok, that helps."

We walked out the door together and faced our fighters that were tensed up on the lawn all around the pack house.

ALPHA, THEY'RE COMING.

WHAT PACK IS IT my father questioned through mind link.

BLOOD MOON PACK

At that a lot of chatter sparked up.

ISN'T THAT OUR RIVAL PACK

I HEARD THEIR ALPHA WENT CRAZY AFTER HE LOST HIS MATE

I HEARD THAT HE'S ABUSIVE AND HAS KILLED MULTIPLE PACK MEMBERS

So on and so forth, each rumor and whisper getting crazier than the last.

SILENCE my dad roared *I CAN'T HEAR MYSELF THINK*

LOVE DO YOU THINK IT'S BECAUSE OF my mom started, but then trailed off.

IT MIGHT BE

ALPHA, WHAT ARE YOUR ORDERS? THEY ARE GETTING CLOSER the border guard pressed.

FOCUS THEM TOWARD THE CLOSER TREE LINE. I'LL STATION SNIPERS IN THE TREES AND FIGHTERS ON THE GROUND IN CASE ANY GET AROUND THE SNIPERS. THE REST OF YOU CATCH ANY LONE WOLVES BEFORE THEY GET TO THE PACK HOUSE

With that, my father assigned roles for everyone. And now I'm sitting halfway up an oak tree ready to shoot anything that moves. The underbrush crackled and swayed and then all hell broke loose.

Chapter 5

Phoenix's POV

Werewolves both shifted and not came crashing through the underbrush. Knives, arrows, bullets, and blood flew through the air. I tried shooting them down, but they were too fast, and before I knew it, my clip was out of ammo. As I reached for a new clip, a wolf jumped up at my tree. Shaking it, and me, to the core, I lost my balance and plummeted to the forest floor about ten feet below. I screamed out in pain when I hit the ground. I had landed on a rock the wrong way (as if there was a right way to land on a rock). The wolf immediately started dragging me toward the pack house. I kicked and fought and twisted, but to no avail. I wished I could speak to my wolf so I could shift, but that wouldn't happen. Before I knew it, the fight was over. There weren't many dead, but we were all being rounded up. They will probably shoot us all.

"Run, run, Phoenix," my brother said after the other wolf left.

"No, I won't leave you," I replied, as I looked at the faces of my family.

"Then you will die with them," a man replied, as a cold gun barrel was pressed against my skull.

“Bad move, dog,” I spit out, as I retaliated at my attacker. I moved fast, spinning around and hitting my attacker multiple times. I was getting the upper hand until I heard two gunshots resound through the clearing. I stumbled back and looked down. There, in my side, were two round holes spilling blood onto the ground. Drumming pulsed through my body. My heart beat. I fell to the floor on my knees, my vision going blurry. Someone was screaming. Was it Axel? My parents? No, this voice was deeper than Axel’s or my parents. I felt two strong arms embrace me and hold me close as sparks shot through my body. Something was dripping on my face. Tears. I used the rest of my strength to pry my eyes open and there in that moment I saw the most handsome man I have ever seen in my life. He had brown hair that dangled into his eyes, beautiful blue eyes. *MATE* my wolf murmured. *OH, SO NOW YOU TALK* I replied sarcastically. *YEAH, ISN’T THAT IRONIC* she said as I closed my eyes for the last time. *AT LEAST YOU GET TO DIE HAPPILY IN THE ARMS OF OUR MATE* she returned as she, too, gave up the fight. I didn’t even have the strength to answer her back. Goodbye, my mate. I’m sorry.

Chapter 6

Ky’s POV – before the fight started

4:40 am

Why am I up at 4:40, you might ask. It’s because we are in route to attack the Pearl Moon Pack. Wolves have already been sent ahead to scout the area while me, my father, and Tannis, along with others, are driving there.

15 MINUTES UNTIL WE REACH THE BORDER a wolf mind-linked.

GOOD my father replied creepily *NOW THEY WILL PAY FOR WHAT THEY DID*

WELL THAT’S NOT CREEPY AT ALL my wolf, Ryder, said to me.

NO KIDDING I replied.

OK, EVERYONE OUT my father ordered.

As we all got out of the cars we could hear the battle raging from where we stood.

“Let’s go,” I ordered, as we set off into the woods.

Blood. That is all we could smell as we reached the front lines. Snipers shot at us from the trees, but we moved too fast for them to hit us. I saw a wolf jump at one of the trees, knocking a girl out from about halfway up the tree. She flailed, trying to land on her feet, but she was all tangled up in her gear. The brown wolf swatted her out of the air and she screamed as she hit the ground. Pain shot through my side as she fell. I let a ferocious growl rip through the air. But as I looked to my side, I had no wound. No damage had been done to me. When I looked up again the girl and the wolf were gone.

SHE MUST BE DEAD BY NOW I thought to myself. At that, my wolf whimpered as if the thought hurt him.

“Ky, follow me,” my father ordered. We reached the edge of the tree line. As we stepped out into the clearing, I saw hundreds of werewolves all gathered in a group on the grass. I couldn’t help but look for the girl who fell out of the tree. But before I could spot her, my father started speaking.

“See that she-wolf next to the Alpha? She was supposed to be mine. She was supposed to be my mate, but that dog stole her from me.”

“But, father, what about mom?” I asked, shocked.

“Hmm...The moon goddess made a mistake. Your mother was a mistake. I never loved her. Not ever. She was beneath me.”

“But she was your mate! Your other half!” I screamed at my father.

“If she really was my other half it would have hurt more when I placed a bullet between her eyes,” he replied with crazed eyes.

To be continued...

Peter and the Lost Girl, Part 1 – by Rachel Miller

Chapter 1: Slop

Tommy started to look around at everyone at the table. He nodded at each boy and they nodded back, showing that they were all ready for what was to soon come. Finally, he looked at Peter. Tommy nodded and Peter slowly nodded back. He was scared. What if it didn’t work? What if they all got in trouble and were beaten for not being behaved? He didn’t know if they would succeed, but he hated the orphanage and Tommy looked like he knew what he was doing.

Slowly, but carefully, Tommy stood along with the rest of the boys at their table. There were about thirteen tables in all, with around six kids at each. The six at Tommy’s, including Peter, slowly walked up to the woman who had, for every day of their whole lives, handed out the same bowls of the same disgusting slop. The six shuffled over to where she stood by the pot of grossness, led by Tommy, since he was the oldest of the bunch at sixteen and counting. In two years he would be let out of the jail-like “home” and set free on the streets of London, but he was so fed up with everything even *remotely connected* to the orphanage that he couldn’t *stand* another two miserable years there.

All of the boys there seemed to look up to Tommy. There were boys there from ages one to seventeen, there were even some newborns who had been dropped off on the steps of the “home” with nobody around to claim them, so the orphanage had to take them in. That was how Peter had gotten there. There all his life, he had never known anything but work, slop, work, slop, sleep. That was his daily routine. *Every day! No excuses!*

Tommy, on the other hand, had been dropped off at the boy’s home at the age of twelve. He had been part of a poor family that lived off of the few scraps of food that he and his brother found in the garbage or had stolen. Tommy desperately wanted to go back to his old life, though no one could understand why. He told them it was about the adventure, the excitement, and the fun of stealing things and running away after being caught.

His family, of course, in the end, had died of a mysterious disease. No one knew what it was, but it had killed his whole family. Except for him. The doctors couldn't figure out why he wasn't dead, but they didn't want to waste their precious time with measly little kids, so they sent him off to a "good home."

Here we are. Peter thought as the group stopped in front of the woman. *What now?*

"Ahem." Tommy and the others watched the woman for her response. First she looked confused. Before they walked up, her head had been hanging low with her arms slumped to her sides. Peter realized that she must have been asleep. Now Tommy had just woken her up from her pleasant dream of having tea with the queen, and instead of that she was now just the woman who served slop for a bunch of ungrateful children.

"What?!" she nearly yelled right in Tommy's face.

He flinched and for a second he looked like he was about to back down. "Ma'am," he said slowly and politely, "we'd...uh," he said motioning towards the rest of us, "well, we'd like...another bowl." He said the last two words so slowly and quietly that I doubted that she could actually hear him.

"Another bowl?" she asked quietly, like an animal creeping up on its prey. "You want *more* food?!" She was angry. How could these children want *more* food?! Even if they only got two meals a day, that was all the orphanage could provide them with.

"Yes, ma'am...and I promise, if you give the leftovers to us six, we won't tell the others and we'll never ask you again," Tommy said, thinking quickly. The woman glared. All she wanted to do was eat for a little while, was that too much to ask?

She continued to glare at the horrid, pale, stick-like children standing in front of her. She tried to look down on all of them, but the leader of the group was almost taller than she was. "Give me those!" she hissed at them, taking their bowls out of their hands at the same time.

Plot, plop, plop, went the slop into the wooden bowls, one by one. Tommy straightened up taller, knowing that he had persuaded the woman into something she would never have done before. All in all, he was proud of himself.

After they were all filled, the boys grabbed their bowls and quickly scurried back to the small, rectangular table. They all smiled at each other as they picked out the biggest chunks of meat and potato and put them into a small pocket. This would be the only food they would have once they left the orphanage for good.

Without it, they would starve to death.

Chapter 2: The Escape

Peter lay in bed for as long as he could to pretend that he was asleep. They couldn't let the other boys know what they were up to. Suddenly, Peter heard a squeak come from the back of the bedroom. He slowly looked around, trying not to move his head while doing so.

Squeak!

Another one! Were they found out? Was there a robber inside?

"Peter."

He almost screamed, but Tommy had put his hand over his mouth so he couldn't make a sound.

"Tommy," Peter sighed in relief. "I thought you were a robber."

Tommy chuckled quietly. "Well, I'm not a robber, but we will need to be as quiet as one to get out of this place."

Finally! It was here. The moment they had been preparing for for almost a month. The escape!

Peter was excited and scared at the same time. He took slow breaths in and out as Tommy woke the other three boys. The youngest of them, Jasper, was five years old. He had been awakened first.

As the others woke up, they hoped that none of the other boys would hear them making their way to the big window on the left side of the room.

Their biggest problem would be jumping from the window ledge to the roof, and finally to the ground in the alleyway. From the ledge to the roof was about three feet, which they could all make, but from the roof to the ground was nearly ten.

Tommy said that he could do it easily, and two of the taller kids would be able to land all right. Peter, Jasper, and a seven-year-old named Isaac, though, well, there was the problem. Tommy figured that if any of them tried to jump they would at least get a few scratches. At worst, they could *die*.

The plan as for Tommy and the two older boys to go first. Then the younger kids would jump and be caught by one of the kids already on the ground.

Everyone seemed to understand what was going to happen, except for Peter. The younger boys had been assigned to an older one who was supposed to catch them when they jumped from the roof. The problem was that he had been assigned to Marcus. He was the so-called "bully" there at the home for orphaned boys.

Sure, everyone there was mean at some point or another, but Marcus, well, let's just say he was the kind of guy you didn't want to get on the wrong side of. A few years back a boy by the name of James came to live at the home. He came with only one thing with him, a blanket, one of those good, thick ones.

Well, the orphanage was a cold place. Marcus saw it and wanted it to keep him warm at night. He told James that if he didn't give him the blanket that he would pound him into the ground. James refused – worst choice of his life! A few days later, everyone was called to dinner at the end of their afternoon work, but James didn't show up. The next day no one could find him, and the next, and the next, and the next. James had totally disappeared. Well, except for his blanket. Another boy, William, had found James's blanket in Marcus's bed a week after he had gone missing. It was then then theorized that Marcus had killed James just so he wouldn't be cold at night.

For some reason, though, Tommy hadn't seen making Peter put his life into the hands of a psychopath any problem at all. All of his focus was in escaping the prison.

As they reached the window the boys, one by one, climbed over the ledge and softly landed on the roof.

When they were all there, the three older boys jumped off and landed in the alley as quietly as they could. When it was Marcus's turn to jump, he had a huge, nasty grin on his face. Peter couldn't tell if it was because he was finally going to be free, or if he was looking forward to Peter's blood staining the ground red.

He shivered. *Don't think that way*, he told himself.

Jasper was first. He jumped with all his might. Tommy caught him easily and set him on the ground.

Then it was Isaac's turn. He jumped. His partner caught him and set him down same as Tommy had done.

Peter was next. He was the last one on the roof. He took a step back, getting ready to jump off a perfectly good roof. He looked into Marcus's eyes. *Oh boy!* He thought. *What have I gotten myself into now?*

Even though he was probably going to die in the process, Peter jumped off the roof, his eyes wide and fixed on Marcus, his arms out wide. *Please, I'm too young to die!*

Thump! Marcus set him on the ground. It was over. Maybe Marcus wasn't as bad as he'd thought. He had jumped, and he had been caught. It was that simple. He was alive!

Chapter 3: The Tagalong

"Tommy?" We all looked up into the window of the orphanage. "Tommy, is that you?"

I couldn't tell who was talking, but it was definitely one of the boys.

"John?" Tommy half-yelled to the boy in the window, as to not wake the others who were still asleep.

"Yeah, it's me, but what are you doing?!" he yelled.

John, he was the newest boy. He'd only gotten there about a week ago and he'd been having a hard time sleeping each night. In his time there, the only friend he'd made was, of course, Tommy. He was the only one who knew anything about John, so they all let out a sigh of relief when Tommy smiled up at the poorly dressed child.

"It's okay. We're just..." Tommy turned around and looked at us with a queasy smile. I shrugged, not sure what he should tell John. Some of the others seemed to follow my example.

Tommy turned back to look at the window. "Running an errand...for Miss. Truce."

Miss. Truce was the head lady at the home for boys, and was known for giving out the meanest, hardest, and *grossest* job any boy would have in his entire life!

"Miss. Truce?"

"Yeah, she wanted us to...uh"

"But I thought she wasn't here today," said John, scaring us all half to death.

What now? He's onto us!

"John, can you keep a secret?" Tommy said playfully, gazing up at the boy.

John nodded slowly. "I guess so."

"Well, we're running away," Tommy said the last two words slowly, as if saying it fast would have split the boy's brain in two.

"You're leaving?"

"I know, John, but you can't tell-"

"I want to come with you!"

"What?!" We were all so confused at this point, I guess he didn't know what else to say.

"If you don't let me come...I'll wake everyone up!"

"What?!" Tommy was so stunned that that was all he could say.

"Fine!" I yelled, surprising everyone, including myself, "Get onto the roof and Tommy will catch you when you jump down here."

John obeyed, smiling as he jumped to the roof and then into Tommy's outstretched arms.

"Now, let's go!" Tommy said, snapping out of his confused state, turning and running into the dark alleyway and into their new lives.

Chapter 4: Handling Mark

"My legs hurt!" Isaac whined for the eighth time in the hour they had been walking. It was about one in the morning, and they'd escaped around midnight. Tommy said they needed to get as

far away from the orphanage as they could, because they would be looking for the seven boys the moment they were seen to be missing.

"Oh, will you quit it already!" Marcus nearly yelled at Isaac, scaring the young boy into quietness.

Well, that didn't last long at all, I thought to myself, as Isaac started once again to whine about everything that he could possibly think of.

"I'm hungry!" "I'm cold!" "My feet hurt!" "I'm tired!" As this went on and on, Tommy, Henry, Jasper, John, and I all waited with anticipation, knowing that sooner or later this would get to Marcus, making him boil over the top. Probably ending with the seven-year-old boy on the ground, crying because he now had a black eye.

I didn't know about the others, but I was trying to figure out whether Tommy would step in and stop Marcus, or if he was just going to let it play out like the rest of us knew it would.

"Where are we even going?!"

"Oh, would you just be quiet, you little--"

"Mark."

He had finally had enough, and as always, Tommy was there to be the hero. (Well, not always. Sorry, James.)

Seeing that he had Marcus's attention, Tommy continued in a calm, but stern voice. "Let Isaac be. He's a kid."

"Yes. A very, very annoying one!"

Tommy sighed and turned to Isaac. "You gotta stop complaining, kid. We're all tired, and we're all hungry, just the same as you."

"Then, can we take a break? Please?! Just a short one?!" Tommy just looked at Isaac and frowned.

We all knew what he was thinking. All Tommy wanted to do was get as far from the orphanage as he possibly could. Stopping to take a break would delay that.

"Come on, Ike. We'll walk a little bit longer, then we'll take a break. I promise!" Isaac didn't look satisfied. Tommy looked around for help. Then, he saw that we all felt the same way the seven-year-old did – tired and hungry.

Tom sighed in defeat, "Fine, we'll take a break. But not for long! The orphanage will be on us soon, and I am *not* going back to that prison!"

Chapter 5: Don't Starve

Tired and exhausted, we all collapsed onto the dirt ground of the alleyway. It was relaxing up until we all seemed to realize at once that we were all *really, really* hungry. "Tommy," Peter said cautiously, "would it be okay if we ate a little bit of the food we brought?" Everyone turned to see how their leader would reply.

"Come on, Pete, it's only been an *hour*."

"I know, but the only food we had for dinner last night was the slop, and that was *disgusting*! You can't tell me that you're not hungry, because we all know that that's not true."

"Why don't you all just listen to what I say? I *am* the oldest." This is what Tommy *thought* he was saying to himself, but we all heard him, loud and clear.

"Fine, do what you want!" The last time Peter had heard him shout like that, the orphanage was trying to sell him to a factory for manual labor. "It's not like I'm the most experienced or anything," he whispered "to himself" again, but nobody was listening to him anymore, because they were all tearing their pockets open and stuffing big chunks of cold potato into their mouths.

Well, everyone except John, of course. You see, in the rush to escape, none of them had realized that while they had stored food in the pockets of their clothes, John hadn't. John was their last minute tagalong. He had not brought extra food in his pockets, he had not worn extra clothes to keep him warm, he hadn't even worn day clothes at all – he was still in his pajamas.

So, as all the other boys were stuffing their faces, John sat on the dirty ground, wondering when everyone was going to realize that he had nothing to eat.

As Peter was eating his share with delight, he realized that there were only five 'I'm stuffing my face with cold potatoes' sounds. This partially made sense because Tommy was probably too mad at everyone to do anything other than stare at his shoes in anger. Even then, though, there should have been six "I'm stuffing my face with potatoes" sounds. So, who wasn't eating?

Peter looked up from his early breakfast and looked around. Let's see, who was eating? Tommy, Jasper, Isaac, Marcus...and the third older boy, Henry. So that leaves...

Pete looked around for John. He was sitting away from the rest of the group, watching them eat. He licked his lips and clenched his stomach. Then his eyes met Peter's. His hands fell away from his stomach and his tongue slipped back into his mouth.

"Johnny..." Peter said, confused about why he wasn't eating when he looked so hungry.

Some of the other boys looked up. Tom looked from Peter to John and said, "Johnny, aren't you hungry like everyone else?" The boys who hadn't already been watching looked up.

John switched his gaze from Peter's to Tom's. "Of course I'm hungry...it's just..." he showed his hands, palms up. Then we all understood. Johnny was our Tagalong. He hadn't known about our plan to escape until it was already in action. Therefore, he had saved no food from the night before.

"Everyone stop eating." Most of them had been too distracted by the conversation to continue their breakfast, but the ones who hadn't then did. "We need to start saving our food. John doesn't have any, so when we stop to eat, we will *all* give him some of ours." Tommy seemed to direct the last part towards two people that we all knew wouldn't like that idea at all.

Mark narrowed his eyes at John.

"Oh, come on!" yelled a shrill, high-pitched voice that we all recognized as Ike's. "We already have almost no food and now we have to give some of it to him!" Isaac waved his arms toward John as he said the last word.

"Yes!" said Tommy sternly, now narrowing *his* eyes at Isaac.

Mark moved over to where Ike was and glared at Tom. "Then, let's all just hope we *don't* starve!"



Drawings
by
Hannah
Bradley



teen zine contributors:

**Melanie Andersen, Samantha Andersen, Taylor Bradley,
Hannah Bradley, Gecko, and Rachel Miller
Please join us at our next meeting!**

teen zine is a publication of the Huntley Area Public Library's teen writers' club and includes members' work as well as submissions from area teens in grades 6 – 12. If you would like to submit your writing or artwork for review and possible inclusion in a future issue of the zine, please fill out a submission form (available at the library's Information Desk), or use our online submission form <http://www.huntleylibrary.org/teen-zine-2/>.