

## Monsters in the Closet

I braced myself against the side of the plane as it banked sharply to the left and felt the color drain from my face in fear. The pilot threw me a vaguely sympathetic look and mumbled an apology into his headset. He hadn't spoken but a handful of words to me since I'd met him. This made it especially uncomfortable to be alone with him at several thousand feet above the ground. He was the stereotypical Alaskan woodsman--tall, burly, bearded and sporting a flannel shirt. The plane leveled out again, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I hated flying even on commercial airplanes, but being in this tiny four-seater was torture. I could feel the wind buffeting its thin aluminum frame and prayed that each lurch and bump wouldn't knock us out of the sky. My hand went to my jean pocket where I fingered the frayed edge of the letter that was the cause of my current misery.

A week earlier I had been enjoying my summer back home in Seattle. But then the letter came--the letter from my father, whom I hadn't seen since he left me and my mom when I was twelve. Sure, there had been occasional calls and birthday cards, but zero visits. None in the entire five year span. And here out of the blue was a letter asking, begging, me to come visit *him*, telling me how much he missed me and wanted to see me. At first I refused to go; I wanted nothing to do with him. Mom thought it would be good for me, though, and after a long argument she convinced me to give him a chance. She is a far more forgiving person than I.

Another sharp turn wrenched me from my thoughts, and I looked out the window to see that we were lined up with a dirt runway below. The plane shuddered as the landing gear clicked into place and I gripped my seat with all my might. The gruff pilot fought the winds, bringing the plane closer to the ground until finally its wheels slammed onto solid earth. We slowed to a stop and the pilot cut the engine. I fiddled with the door handle, not sure how to open it, and eventually stepped out of the plane. I stretched and took a deep breath, utterly relieved to be safe and on the ground again.

"Follow me," the pilot said while he picked up my bags.

I hurried to keep up with his long strides and we headed toward a log building that I assumed to be a sort of terminal.

"You're meeting someone here, right?" he asked upon entering the building. It was a small, cozy place with a rustic feel. More like a home than a terminal.

"Yeah, my dad," I replied as I scanned the room for his face. "I don't see him though...."

"Well I've got to head back out," he said as he set down my bags, "so just wait 'til he gets here I guess. Enjoy your stay in Talkeetna," he finished and held out his hand. I shook it awkwardly, his calloused hand engulfing mine, and thanked him. He went back out the door, leaving me a bit bewildered and alone. Not sure what to do, I moved my luggage and sat on a nearby couch, half of which was taken up by an enormous sleeping husky. The worn cushion sank heavily when I sat on it, causing the animal to open one eye in order to survey what had interrupted its nap. I patted its furry head, and it sighed in doggy appreciation. I thought about the fact that four hours ago I had been hugging Mom at the gate in Sea-Tac, and now I was petting a dog in the middle of the Alaskan

wilderness. I laughed softly at how bizarre that felt, when suddenly a shadow fell over me. I glanced up to see a grinning boy that looked my age.

"I see you've met Isis," he said and scratched the husky's huge back.

"Oh...uh, yeah," I stumbled over my words, not sure if I'd done something wrong in petting the dog. "Is it okay for me to be sitting here?"

"Of course, that's what it's here for," the boy laughed as he sat on the opposite arm of the couch. "You need some help?"

"No, I'm just waiting on my dad. I'm spending a week or so with him."

"Ah, okay. Well do you mind having some company while you wait? I work with the sightseeing service over there," he gestured towards a desk on the other side of the room, "and things are going kinda slow. I'm bored out of my mind."

I laughed. "I'd love the company, actually. I'm Hannah by the way."

"Jesse. Nice to meet you."

Jesse and I chatted for a few minutes, making generic small talk until his boss called him back to work, leaving me, once again, alone. I stared at the ceiling, finding surprising shapes in the knots and wood grains, until the door opened and blew a gust of wind into the room. I looked over to see my father standing in the doorway.

At first I was frozen, paralyzed from seeing him for the first time in years. When my legs remembered how to move, I stood up and we met in an uncomfortable embrace. We pulled apart and he rested his hand on my shoulder.

"Hannah..." he whispered, and hugged me again.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't find the words, so I just hugged him back.

"God, you've grown so much," he commented.

"Five years is a long time to grow," I retorted, suddenly feeling hostile and beginning to regret my decision to visit.

"Look...Hanners, I know I screwed up, I'm sorry...."

"Whatever. Can we not do this here?" I hastily grabbed my things, afraid that we would fight and make a scene. He ran his hand down his face and sighed.

"Let me at least get your bags," he offered, and I handed them over. We left the terminal and walked to his truck. He threw my bags in the back and we drove in silence to his house.

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Dad's place was, like most of the buildings in Talkeetna, a log cabin. It was a wreck, a typical bachelor's home. Books, clothes, and general messiness covered everything. He led me up the stairs to a little loft, which was surprisingly clean, with a fold-out couch for a bed. It was already unfolded, covered with crisp white sheets that looked very inviting at the moment. A pang of guilt hit me as I realized that Dad was trying his best, and maybe I shouldn't have snapped at him earlier.

"This is yours. Sorry it's not a real bed but...."

"No, it's fine," I told him.

"I'll let you get settled, and then we can talk about what you want for dinner," he said and went back downstairs.

I flopped down onto the bed and closed my eyes. My mind was racing; so much had happened in such a short amount of time. Part of me was so excited to see Dad and wanted to forgive him immediately, but part of me still harbored anger and bitterness for

how he had abandoned me and Mom. I hadn't planned on falling asleep, but I was so exhausted and the bed felt so good....

Before I knew it, I was sleeping soundly.

That morning, I woke up to an empty house. Dad had left me a twenty dollar bill with a note taped to it telling me he was at work and that I should spend the day exploring Talkeetna. The town was tiny; we'd driven down Main Street on the way to his house, and it hadn't looked very impressive. I could walk the entire town several times over before I got tired. Nevertheless, I decided I had nothing better to do, so I showered and traipsed off towards the town.

Once I arrived downtown, it didn't take me long to visit most of the shops and stores. I followed Main Street to its end, and found myself on what appeared to be the start of a sandy beach. I walked a bit further and came to the edge of a monstrous river. I sat down on its shore and listened to it rush by, powerful and wild; a true embodiment of Alaska. It put me oddly at peace.

"It's funny, in a town this small you can't help but to run into just about everyone you know," a familiar voice said behind me. I heard sandy footsteps and a boy sat down beside me.

"Hey, Jesse," I said.

"Hey, yourself. So how d'you like Talkeetna?"

"It's cute. Not very exciting, but I like it. It's definitely not Seattle."

"Not quite," Jesse laughed.

He took off his sandals and began to bury his toes in the sand. I followed suit, and we fell into easy conversation. We talked for hours about friends and family and books.

How I loved Shakespeare, and he couldn't stand him. How this one time he and his friends built a tree house that broke as soon as they tried to stand on it. And of course, about my dad. How I had no idea what I was feeling or how to deal with it.

"Just see how it all plays out," he told me, "you can't really do anything else, can you?"

We sat quietly for a bit, until I checked my watch and realized what time it was.

"I should probably go back," I told him. "I'll see you later, Jess."

I shook the sand out of my toes and put my shoes back on. I began my trek home, and looked over my shoulder one last time at the lone figure still sitting by the water.

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When I got home, Dad was in the kitchen, beginning to cook dinner. I picked up a knife and helped him cut vegetables. We worked for a while without saying much; one of us would start a conversation that would quickly die and then leave us with an empty silence. Frustrated, I gave up trying and left. I climbed the stairs to my temporary bedroom and pulled out a book from my bag, hoping that reading would take my mind off how awkward Dad and I were. It didn't help. Dinner went only slightly better; we forced out a few laughs and attempted to be lighthearted. I tried to ignore the fact that I had a constant feeling of hatred for him, boiling up from the pit of my stomach. We cleared the table and I hurried up to my room. It was already becoming my hideout, and I'd only been there a day. I fell asleep to the prayer that maybe things between us would work out and we'd be okay again.

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The next few days went past uneventfully; they all started to run together. Jesse and I seemed to always be together; he was remarkably easy to talk to. He became my confidant, since I couldn't call any of my friends back home. There's no cell service in the middle of Alaska, and Dad didn't have a phone. And while Jesse and I saw each other all the time, Dad and I were hardly ever around each other. When we were, we wished we weren't. We never got any better, and no matter how hard I tried to barricade my anger, it was impossible to build that wall. I couldn't forgive him and I couldn't be near him without feeling furious.

My days in Talkeetna were drawing to a close, and I was on my bed reading, once again avoiding contact with my dad. Exasperated that I couldn't even find solace in a book, I threw it across the room, not caring what it hit. I flipped onto my back and thought about trying to sleep, but couldn't. I rolled out of bed and started down the stairs. I was tired of fighting this tempest of emotions; I wasn't going to lie there and fume any longer. I needed to talk this feeling away.

"Dad?" I called when I reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Yeah, Hannah?" he replied and poked his head out of a doorway.

"Why don't you love me?" I blurted out, not knowing quite why I said it. A pained look crossed his face and he walked toward me.

"Oh Hannah, please don't...I do love you."

"Then why did you leave me?" My voice was much louder than I'd meant it to be. "Why did you leave and never bother to come back? Was I not a good enough daughter? Why, Dad?" I was screaming now.

"It was never you, Hannah! Don't ever think that," he looked hurt and distraught.

"How can I not think that, Dad?" My words shook, and I felt tears begin to prick up in the corners of my eyes.

"I've always loved you Hanners..." he trailed off. "Look, I didn't know what to do. Your mother and I...we made a mistake when we got married. We were never meant for each other, and I couldn't pretend anymore. I never meant to hurt you like that, but...I don't know. I can't make excuses. I should have visited, I know. But I didn't know how you and your mother would react. So I put it off and put it off and finally couldn't take it anymore, which is why I sent you that letter. I had to see you again."

I was at a loss for words. I don't know what I was expecting, but I felt even more lost than before. I crumpled to the floor and sat on the bottom step, my knees hugged to my chin, while I struggled to keep from crying. Dad cautiously sat down beside me and, at first, made no move to touch me. Then he put his arm around me and pulled me against his huge frame.

"I'm so so sorry, Hannah, I really am. I love you, honey."

And then I couldn't hold back my tears. They began to stream down my face and I lost all control. I cried into my dad's shoulder until there were no more tears and only dry, shaking sobs. When my sobs dwindled to sniffles, Dad and I finally had a real conversation. I talked out all my pain, and when I was done he carried me to bed like he used to when I was little, when I would come running to him, afraid of the monsters in my closet. He kissed my forehead and left me to fall into a deep sleep.

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My last day in Talkeetna was the Summer Solstice. There was something poetic in that fact--even though one thing was ending, another was beginning. Every year the

town celebrated the Solstice with a festival on the beach by the river, and of course Dad and I went. We made our way to the river, and for the first time, we were okay together. We joked and sincerely laughed, we talked and weren't uncomfortable. The night before had changed me; it made me realize how much I didn't want to hate him anymore. Since then, we'd felt like father and daughter again. After a while of talking with my dad, I ran into Jesse, who hugged me when I briefly recounted the night before.

"See? I told you it'd all work out," he grinned.

He understood that tonight was mine and Dad's though, so we parted ways, planning to say goodbye at the airport the next day. The festival went on and became a blur of smiles and laughter. Part of the tradition, I learned, was the burning of the Basket of Hope--a wooden structure which everyone decorated with scraps of paper that held their hopes or secrets. The burning was symbolic of a new beginning, a purging and a promise to start over, a promise to live life to the fullest. I took the letter my father had sent me such a short time ago and flipped it over. On its back I wrote: *I am learning to love and forgive*. I tied it to the Basket where it blended in with the hundreds of other sentiments that had been added.

Later that night the Basket of Hope was burned. As the ashes of it rose to the sky, I felt my heart soar with them, and I knew that coming to Alaska had been the best decision I'd ever made.