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Insulation and Paper

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INSULATION AND PAPER

by

MARY ELIZABETH SKINNER

KERRY MADDEN-LUNSFORD, COMMITTEE CHAIR
JAMES BRAZIEL
JACI WELLS

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2022

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2022

INSULATION AND PAPER
MARY ELIZABETH SKINNER
ENGLISH
ABSTRACT

Insulation and Paper reflects on my childhood and teenage years as a dreamy, adventure-seeking teenager who faced the harsh realities of living through an EF-4 tornado. This piece explores the ups and downs of being homeschooled, the scars of unprocessed trauma, complex family bonds, and growing up being Catholic and homeschooled.

The story starts on April 26, 2011, the night before a deadly tornado outbreak, where I was writing on a story titled, Atallas. The first few chapters demonstrate how obsessed I was with fantasy, dance, storms, and adventure, being stuck at home with only a few friends. As the story continues, an EF-4 tornado demolishes much of my hometown. While it barely missed our house, but the tornado tore down multiple trees around my house, trees that had come to represent my childhood. I'm left picking up the pieces, slowly realizing these trees symbolized a sort of death to my childhood. However, after the tornado, I let go of a childhood crush, started making serious friends, gained confidence in my awkwardness, and even met my future husband.

This first part explores up to the day after the tornado. Readers will get to know most of the main characters through this section and understand the setup for the more extensive exploration of self later in the memoir.

DEDICATION

To my family, your love and support through my twenty-seven years of life are incomparable. Also, thanks for giving me content for my thesis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing process is never done in a vacuum, so there are plenty of people I would like to thank. First, I want to thank Kerry Madden for offering me a space to develop this thesis. Without you, I never would have explored this topic; as it was through your non-fiction class, this idea blossomed, none would I have learned as much as I have about writing. I can never thank you enough.

I want to thank Rebecca Bach and Kyle Grimes for their guidance during the past three years has been immensely helpful.

A big thank you to Jaci Wells and Jim Braziel for taking the time out of their busy schedules to be on my committee. You have both been incredible mentors, and I am honored to have you both supporting me.

I'm indebted to UAB's Writing Center and all the past and present tutors. UAB's Writing Center has become my second home, and I love every one of the tutors there as if they were my family. Thank you all for the support you have shown throughout the process, from cheerleading on the sidelines to reading over sections of my thesis.

Jaci Wells deserves special thanks. You have been such a supportive boss and mentor throughout undergraduate and graduate school and have been a powerful role model for me. Thank you for always being such an amazing, supportive boss, mentor, and friend.

Mom, who has always encouraged me to get my degree and pursue my dreams, also deserves thanks. Without your constant support and dedication, I would not have made it through these three years. You are an inspiration, and I could not have done this without you.

And finally, a warm thank you to my husband. I could not have gotten through these three years without you pulling me back to my feet every time I fell. Your love, kindness, and support at every step of the journey kept me afloat. I love you.

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“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door. You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off too.”

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Rings*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTIONS

April 26, 2011

7:30 p.m.

Some of their physical differences are pointed ears, they are usually taller than humans on average, but their eyes are amazingly clear and always in vivid shades of blues, green, and...

I'd stopped at the "and," probably well aware that what I'd written was absolutely the worst intro to a fantasy anyone had ever written. I wanted to be like J.R.R. Tolkien, Suzanne Collins, and Christopher Paolini, but whenever I sat down to start writing my "best seller," I'd look at the work of my hands with disgust. This particular night, I stared at the paragraph, slumped on one fist. This is nothing like a good beginning, I'd thought with annoyance as I stared at the blinking line after the "and" on the family desktop. Who'd want to pick up a story that began like this?

Sixteen-year-old me loved to craft stories. I filled numerous notebooks and word documents with pieces of countless stories. I couldn't stop constantly working on at least one story; however, I never could finish them. New adventures always presented themselves, and my mind couldn't rest until I put them on paper. If I wasn't writing, I was knee-deep in a fantasy or sci-fi book. Whether of my creation or others, I enjoyed immersing myself in unknown worlds.

The story I was writing on this particular night was named Atallas, and she was my baby. The story that tipped me over from a little daydreamer to a hopeless, dreamy writer. I'd come up with this story after watching Lord of the Rings for the first time. I'd been so enamored with Tolkien's world, a world full of magic co-existing with those without magic, that I had to create my own. My story that started as a daydreamed fanfiction slowly turned into my own world with its own rules and magic different from Tolkien's creation.

Plus, writing was the perfect way to avoid homework. I was incredibly behind in a lot of my coursework at the end of 2011, and as a homeschooler, there was little motivation to catch up. Mom would just let us work into the summer if we fell behind. Of course, that was never ideal either, and most of the time, I put my homework off to the few weeks before school started back the next year. However, I was behind in geometry in 2011. If there was any subject in school that I never could fully grasp, it was geometry. My algebra skills were impeccable, and I enjoyed the puzzle the x's and y's presented. But geometry was too abstract. It was like arguing with math, and I couldn't wrap my head around the theorems. I'd sit all day on some triangle with x's and y's, unsure how to demonstrate the solution. Even when I watched our curriculum that offered step-by-step solutions for each problem, I still came out bewildered on how to apply the concept to future problems.

I'd rather create. So, I hid away at that corner desk in the "office" side of our long living room, hoping Mom would justify my writing as "doing school" and leave me alone. However, I wouldn't precisely call sitting at the desk hiding. The living room stretched the whole length of the main level. The actual "living room" consisted of an

entertainment center on the farthest wall closest to the stairs and ended with the two green lazy boys with two couches in between, and the “office area” as we’d termed it was the half past the lazy boys with the desktop, file cabinets, bins of schoolbooks, laundry bins, and a spare dining room table covered in folded clothes.

Mom had been doing laundry that night. She’d just gotten caught up on the mounds of laundry that came from a house of five. She’d been a stay-at-home mom from the day she had me, seeing no financial benefit to working jobs that would only cover daycare. She never got her bachelor’s degree. She never got to march in the Million Dollar Band at the University of Alabama as she dreamed. She met Dad while going to UAB to get her grades back up, got married, and had me before she had the chance to graduate. She implored me and my sister, Hannah, to get our degrees. This wasn’t because she regretted staying home, but mostly because if something happened to Dad, she had nothing to fall back on. She liked staying home with us, though. Her essence was her family, Dad, Hannah, and my brother, Nick, and me.

But I planned on going to college. Always had. I had it all figured out then.

1. Graduate high school
2. Go to college
3. Meet the ONE
4. Graduate
5. Get married within a year
6. Have kids and stay at home
7. Write my best seller (if I hadn’t already)

It was a foolproof plan. Perfect in every aspect.

And naïve as Hell.

“Whatcha doing?” Mom asked.

My cheeks burned, and I lowered the document, “Nothing!”

“I’m not reading it, don’t worry.” Mom laughed.

“It’s not ready,” I mumble. I hover over the icon, wondering if it was safe to reopen.

“That’s fine.” She was amused by my discomfort but never stopped folding the clothes.

“What’s for dinner?” I tried to avoid the conversation about my writing and the mounds of schoolwork nearby.

“Dad’s bringing home chicken. He’s working late.”

“Is he on his way yet?”

Mom reached into her black hoody and checked her phone. We’d finally, after years of begging on my part, had all gotten texting. It was such a blessing. I’d been the odd one out for most of my pre-teen years as all my other friends got phones and, soon after that, texting at thirteen. I had waited two excruciating years for a phone, and we’d gotten texting the year I’d gotten a phone for my fifteenth birthday. Mom had loved it, but Dad was the worst at texting.

“He texted me he was leaving about 20 minutes ago. So, I’m sure soon.”

I sighed, my stomach’s grumbling becoming harder to ignore, “I hope so.”

The back door swung open, and Hannah came in from outside, her long, blond hair dripping with sweat around her temples. Mom glanced over and said, “Hey, what have you been doing?”

Hannah took a deep breath, “Practicing my drills.”

Hannah, unlike me, had taken to soccer after we’d quit gymnastics two years previously. I’d played soccer for two seasons and realized that I was too old and untalented to start soccer. On the other hand, Hannah thrived in an environment where she had the opportunity to use her size and her uncanny power against others. She’d always been a powerhouse for a little four-foot-eleven girl. In gymnastics, she could pull herself up the rope faster than any of the other girls in the gym. I never forgot the way she flew up that rope. Hand over hand, legs out in pike, as if her body was made of clouds. I never could even get close to flying and struggled up that rope even after two years of gymnastics.

When we had to quit gymnastics suddenly due to financial issues two years before 2011, Hannah took it the hardest. Mom, out of nowhere, told us as we were about to leave for gymnastics, “I don’t think we’re going to be able to afford this next year of competition.” I remember the heartbreak and stress that emulated from her as she broke the news to us. The whole gymnastics practice that day rushed by me as I wondered if we would be able to continue, and that night, Mom and Dad sat us down to tell us that there was no way they could continue to afford gymnastics. The gym we were at raised how many ads we had to sell to help pay for the competitions. My parents had very few friends, and none of them owned businesses that they could sell ads to, so they were going to have to pay for it out of pocket. They just couldn’t do it.

I was sad, but it was also a bit of a relief. I was about ready to quit anyway. I saw no reason to continue it into high school and knew I’d be too busy with school to possibly find time to go to the gym forty minutes away every night. I’d quit things before, having

quit ballet when I was twelve and knew something else would be out there. But Hannah had only ever done gymnastics, and Hannah was never one to complain or show her emotions. She'd burn with anger and hurt for ages before she exploded. She always had to be the strong one. However, I could tell she was pretty upset about having to quit. "If I just quit, could y'all afford for Hannah to keep going?" I asked once Hannah was out of the room. Mom shook her head, "Even that's too much. We just can't keep going." After we quit, a lot of anxiety subsided in the family, especially over finances. Mom did everything in her power to find us something else to get involved in. Hannah had soon found a home in recreational soccer while I'd struggled to find a new home due to my age. Recreational sports weren't very friendly towards fourteen-year-old females who were just picking up the activity.

After a drink of water, Hannah went upstairs to change out of her sweaty clothes and take a shower while Mom finished off the last of her and Dad's clothes. At this point, I'd started doing my laundry, which I was unfortunately very behind in like everything else. I finally opened the file back up as Mom went over to the couch to sit down and stared at the paragraph I'd written with little inspiration to continue. Hunger and the harsh overhead light in the office area caused me to be antsy. I saved and closed out the program and decided to bother Nick upstairs.

The upper level of our house was a short hallway with a bathroom to the left at the beginning of the hallway and three bedrooms at the end. Nick's room was on the right, my parents on the left, and the room I shared with Hannah was at the end. Nick's room was my old room for the few years that I'd gotten my own room. It had been a nice

venture, but it ended with me being forced back in my room with Hannah once she began to hit puberty.

However, Hannah and I did not get along well, so the move ended in many petty fights. Hannah was the strong, logical, athletic sister. I was the hopeless dreamer. We'd always been exact opposites. She was the tomboy, and I was the girly girl. I'd always admired her, but she kept herself at a distance, never sharing her feelings, as I mentioned. She wouldn't even let me sit next to her half the time. She'd tense up and inch away, or worse, just tell me to go away. Of course, I'd just try to sit closer to annoy her, which only led to fighting and more hurt feelings.

So, moving in together did not go well at first. When I'd first moved in, my bed sat on the exact opposite wall to Hannah's bed. I went to bed before midnight, early for our homeschool house that didn't have any set wake-up times, but Hannah would stay up late reading. Being accustomed to my pitch-black room, the bright light would keep me up. Sometimes I'd doze off only to wake up well into the night with her light still on.

"Can't you turn that off?" I'd hiss.

No answer.

"Hannah?"

Nothing.

I would sigh heavily, get out of bed, walk over to turn off her lamp when she'd wake up. She'd glair at me with a glair so evil it would have sent Satan back down into Hell. I'd freeze, momentarily fearing for my safety, before recomposing myself and snapping, "Next time, turn off your nightlight."

She'd turn off the light with a huff then rollover.

I'd storm back to my bed and struggle to go back to sleep.

To end the teenage drama, Mom constructed a wall out of canvas tarps and plastic PVC pipe. It was ugly but effective. My side was the side with the door to our bedroom, while her side was the more private side of the room but contained the closet. As you can imagine, fights still occurred, but for other reasons, like Hannah refusing to knock before walking in and me walking to the closet on her side without asking.

And her light still kept me up some nights despite the divider.

Nick sat in a dining room chair in front of an old TV playing Wii with my baby cousin, Ian. I came and leaned on the chair watching them play Super Smash Brothers, and I could hear a little five-year-old voice from the phone sitting next to Nick.

“I GOT YOU!” The child screamed.

“Yeah, you did,” Nick said with a cracking voice as he ran his hands through his thick red hair. He'd been hitting puberty hard. Voice cracking, legs double his torso, feet the size of Bigfoot's. He was disproportionate and gangly. His pale, freckled skin and auburn hair added to the overall awkwardness. Nick was the extrovert of the family. He never struggled to have friends at his events, most people liked him, except for an odd kid here or there, and he was funny. We rarely fought, and I enjoyed his company a lot.

He was involved in baseball and knew a lot of boys around our hometown, unlike me, who knew no one from Pleasant Grove. He'd gone to birthday parties and had at least one or two friends he played baseball with consistently. I always loved going to the ballpark and playing around with his friends and my cousins, Alex and Katie. There were swings around most of the ballparks in Pleasant Grove, and there were frequent swinging contests. Occasionally, I'd even dabbled in a game of wall ball, though I wasn't perfect.

We'd grown up with our cousins, Katie, Alex, and Ian, as they lived five minutes across town. Katie, the oldest, was about a year older than I was, Alex was Hannah's age, fourteen, and Ian was about five. Ian loved Nick and called almost every night to play with him. Nick had moments where it annoyed him, but he rarely said no. I think he loved the opportunity to have a younger brother and a chance to play with Alex. When we were kids, we went over to their house all the time. Mom would spend hours talking to Aunt Pam while we'd go into their colossal basement and play with the mounds of toys they had. They had everything, and their house was huge, leaving us all in wonder at their new toys and games as well as their seemingly endless home. Despite all the things they had, the most memorable moments were when we played made-up games or had dance competitions to Kidz Bop and Crazy Frog in their basement. In recent years, we'd gotten even closer to them as Aunt Pam brought us to homeschool ballroom dance classes every Friday.

Ballroom dance to me was like soccer to Hannah. After quitting gymnastics, I lost the friends I had made at gymnastics on top of most of the friends I had at my church. My friends at gymnastics never tried to reach out after we quit, though to be fair, I'm not sure I did either, and my friends from church decided that I was too awkward and weird as a homeschooler to be worth their time. Conversations began to take shape around things I couldn't relate to, and circles slowly began to cut me out of them.

“Did you see The King's Speech?”

“Yeah! It was so good. Definitely a great movie.”

“Oh, Ms. Hilda is the worst. I hated her class.”

“Yeah, she's so unfair.”

“Did you go to the track meet on Friday?”

Even when I got to sit at the “cool table,” I was never addressed. I was only tolerated. Sometimes I’d even have a thought, but my timid voice refused to rise above all of theirs. They’d seem like giants at the table while I felt like a hobbit, invisible and barely tall enough to be sitting there.

I tried soccer in hopes of making friends there as I had at gymnastics. Same deal. Everyone already had their friends. They didn’t want anything to do with the weird homeschooler. Could I even blame them? I didn’t know anything about pop culture. I didn’t have teachers or school events to share stories about. I was just home all-day watching freaking PBS or HGTV because Mom was too worried about exposing us to sex.

I tried to convince Mom to send me to public school. That was a hard no. She’d dealt with a lot of bullying in public school, and she didn’t want us exposed to underage sex, drinking, drug use, and God knows what else.

Private school? Valid option but couldn’t afford it.

Ballet? Couldn’t afford it.

“Are you sure I can’t go to public school, Mom?” I’d asked her one day in desperation.

“Baby, high school isn’t what you think it is.”

“But I want to go to prom and homecoming! I want a normal life.”

Mom sighed, “I’m sorry, baby. I’m going to do what I feel is best. We’ll find something.”

Of course, that just pissed me off more. Until one day, Mom came home from her homeschool group faculty meeting with a flyer, “Good news, sweetie. There is going to be a homeschool Masquerade Ball in a few months. Katie’s interested in going too, so Pam and I are going try to get y’all to that.”

So, we did. Mom and I looked online for a cute dress for me to wear. Something I’d be able to wear again since finances were still tight. Finally, we landed on a white dress with a pale blue vine pattern. It was spaghetti-strapped, so I had to wear a little bolero to stay modest. I’d protested that a bit but allowed it so that I could wear the dress. We bought a cheap blue mask, and the ensemble was complete.

Finally, the day arrived. I spent so long trying to figure out how to get my hair to curl, only for it to fall out by the time I got to the dance. Katie arrived in a below-the-knee dress that looked like a black top with a long, dark gold skirt. We walked in together and participated in the dance class before the dance. The rest of the time, we sat there and awkwardly talked. She’d always been super sporty, being a fantastic softball pitcher and a bit of a tomboy, while as I mentioned, I was dramatic and girly. I adored her for most of our childhood, and she tolerated me, kind of like Ian and Nick. However, at this point, I probably had moved past the adoring stage and into a normal cousin friendship.

As we sat there, I was starstruck by ballroom dancing. It was like magic. I watched a couple fly around the dance floor as they waltzed together like something from a fairytale. The ballroom dancing was even more magical than watching it. The guys’ leads told me exactly where to go, and the years of ballet told my feet how to interpret their leads. Because I picked dance up so quickly, I ended the night with many compliments

from the guys. One guy, who'd been dancing well around the church hall, asked me to dance. He started slowly then built up to more complex moves.

"You're doing great."

"Thank you," I blushed, though I swelled beneath my mock modesty.

"You're good at following a lead. Have you danced before?"

"Not ballroom, but I've done lots of ballet."

"That's probably it then!"

I'd smiled so happy to be dancing again and to be acknowledged by another human as worthy of attention.

In the end, my cousin and I begged our parents to let us start going to the classes. Nick had speech therapy on Fridays, so it was all up to Aunt Pam. I prayed so hard that she'd say yes. She didn't immediately, but finally, she did. We would all pile into her SUV and go across town to a homeschool ballroom class in Hoover every Friday.

"Hey!" Dad's voice carried up from downstairs, "Dinner's here!"

I immediately raced down the stairs. I never missed an opportunity to have my dinner hot and immediately, especially if the dinner featured chicken fingers. The black Styrofoam box lay wrapped in the plastic bag with the Zaxby's logo on it. I unwrapped the plastic bag, covered in condensation, and opened the box full of steaming, sacred tenders. I placed five on a plate next to the even more holy sauce and grabbed some sun chips before going to sit in our living room.

The forest green lazy boys sat in the middle of the room with a small path in-between. They were ancient. The fabric was an uncomfortable velvet, and the arms were permanently soiled with God knows what. They matched in material but not in style. One

had buttoned cushions and a wooden edge around the sides of the headrest, while the other had a solid cushion with no wood. They came from my great grandparents, which side I'm unsure of, but I hated them along with the couch. My future home would never have such ugly furniture, and I used to dream of the day when I could pick out my own furniture and decorate it the way I wanted. We went through many couches through my childhood, none of them new. Except for 2011, Mom and Dad had finally gotten a new sofa. The material was a bit itchy, and the cushions sunk too much when you sat on them. It was new, though. Mom was very proud of it, so we were forced to eat on the old couch under the window, a grandma's special covered in large roses and completed by a sheet over the cushions to cover the tearing fabric beneath. I sat down on the old couch, crossed myself, mumbled a quick, "Blessusourlordandtheseourgiftswhichweareabouttorecievethroughtheybountyandthrough christourlordAMEN," and dug in.

The rest of the house moved around me in slow preparation. We often sat at the table, but if the table was dirty or we were just too tired to do anything but watch TV, we ate in the living room. We were all too tired that night, and the table was covered in Easter presents from the past Sunday. Mom still tried to corral everyone so we could eat together, screaming for my siblings to come down and eat. I could hear Dad set his things in his little drawer in the kitchen and watched as he went upstairs to change with heavy sighs of exhaustion. My siblings finally worked their way downstairs in a slow daze, Hannah with wet hair from her shower and Nick still carrying the phone with my cousin on the other end babbling on about a game he was playing. It was the typical commotion, especially on a late-night like this.

Finally, everyone but Nick trickled in. He went upstairs to continue to play with Ian. Everyone sat in their places. Dad in the lazy boy closest to the windows, Mom tucked on the edge of her new couch, with her laptop close by, and Hannah in the other lazy boy. Dad, luckily, took the remote. If it were up to Mom, it would be put on some horribly annoying kid show, like Dora the Explorer, she found amusing because she was too worried about commercials and anything remotely sexual. But with Dad, he'd at least look for a sport to put on.

Tonight, it was the news.

Mom said, "Do we have to watch this?" Her button nose in the air.

"I just want to see the weather," Dad sighed.

I zoned out the news, mostly about local murders followed by some feel-good stories to make you feel better about the world. It was always the same, and we didn't even watch the news often. Soon, a bald man in a suit popped up on the screen.

James Spann. A local Birmingham celebrity. I have no idea how a meteorologist became such an enigma, but James Spann is the face of weather awareness in Birmingham and surrounding areas. He was a legend, a man with a following. Central Alabamians didn't watch any other meteorologist during a severe weather event; you watched Spann.

Dad was a true fanboy. While Dad went into accounting, weather was his true passion. He'd sit at the computer every morning with his Diet Coke and toast and watch James Spann's weather vlogs. Sometimes, I'd join him in the office chair at the corner computer. I didn't understand a thing, but I always remember the crumbs on Dad's shirt and the smell of coke on his breath. Sometimes he'd explain to me all the intricate

science behind the weather for the day. I'd stare at him with wonder as he was able to just pull this information out of his head.

This led to an extremely unhealthy interest in storms on my part. One of my earliest memories was peaking up from my parent's rental cellar. I was three. The only thing I remember was Mom pacing in the cellar and the flashlight shedding light from Dad's hand onto the bumpy linoleum floor after the storm had passed. There was always curiosity in Dad's eyes as he looked past the blinds or stepped onto the front porch as he searched for the storm, arms on his waist as if nothing could hurt him. He wanted to experience the adventure of a storm, see it all firsthand, and so did I. I wanted more than anything to see a tornado. I hid in basements and conners from severe storms so many times as a child and never once saw or experienced a tornado. Tornadoes were like mythical beasts everyone talked about, but only a few had seen. By 2011, I'd pretty much given up on the idea that I'd ever see or experience a tornado. However, when James Spann showed us the Storm Prediction Center's Convective Outlook for the next day, dark reds and high percentages covering our state, I wanted to believe this could be the opportunity I was waiting for.

"So, is it really going to be bad?" I asked.

"It's not good," Dad sighed, "That first line might knock some of the force out of it, though. We can only hope. But it does look like I won't be sleeping much tonight. I'll wake y'all up if anything looks dangerous."

"I'll be up too," Mom shrugged, "So between the two of us. We'll be alright, I'm sure."

James Spann was soon off the news, and the TV remote migrated to Mom as Dad headed up the stairs to watch TV in my parents' room. I sat there staring for a good while at whatever show Mom decided to put it on, but it wasn't worth it. Hannah soon went up to her room, and I orbited back to the computer.

I sighed as I opened a new document. Maybe I just need to start fresh. I sat for a minute, trying to think back to the stories I had read and remember what about them caught my interest. I could start with a historical introduction. I decided to try that route, and my fingers began to fly across the keyboard, pausing to create names of characters and places, bringing the ideas in my head to life. Finally, a paragraph formed from the labor of my efforts.

In the year 9,063 a knight, Rotalleb, was living in the small elfish kingdom of Loni, not far from the high city of Lori. He had fought in the War of the Lily's in 8,703 and tried to make peace with the between the Elfish Empire of Angam Muireni and the Human Empire of Mantut. But the kingdoms refused to the terms and Rotalleb retreated to his home town of Loni where he devoted the next 360 years of his life to caring for a lavish gardan. People from miles around came to see his gardan for it was the most brilliant in all of Angam Muireni. No one ever knew how he made his trees so tall (and so quickly at that); flowers such vivid and bright blues, pinks, reds, violets, yellows, and oranges; and grass so green. When ever he was asked he would say that 'it's' power would be used for the wrong reasons if ever got in the wrong hands. This 'It' was a stone he had welded all the powers of nature into.

I smiled. Yeah. That's better.

I saved the document “The Story of Atallas,” knowing I’d be back tomorrow to continue writing on it, kissed Mom goodnight, and went to bed.

The last save time was 11:56 p.m. April 26, 2011.

CHAPTER 2

Sixth Sense

“Suddenly Atallas froze; she could smell something she hadn’t before. “I smell pixies. They’re close... and getting closer.” Section from - “Mix with the Pix 1” last saved July 24, 2010

April 27th, 2011

7:30 a.m.

Dad woke me up the next morning as he was getting ready for work. He used to wake me as he left for work all the time, and I would roll over and go back to sleep to the lull of the air conditioner. That morning, the wind whistled against the house and the odd absence of the air conditioner’s drone drew my mind to the events from the preceding night. A storm came through the night before, a horrible one. Thunder and howling wind woke me up, but Dad had peaked into our room to let us know he was watching the storm.

“I’ll get y’all up if it’s too bad,” he’d said before closing the door behind him. I believed him and attempted to go back to sleep. He did not come back in, despite how the wind shook the oak’s branches outside my window and the thunder crashed around the house.

I rolled out of bed, hoping to maybe catch Dad before he left. I wanted to ask him about the storms the night before and the possible storms to come that day, but instead of Dad downstairs, I found Mom sitting in a dark living room, on the phone with someone.

My first thought had been that it was the power company as the power was out. Deep shadows covered the house, but light poured through the living room windows filling it with a cool gray light. However, as I sat down next to Mom, I recognized the male voice on the other end, though I couldn't place it. Mostly, Mom spoke in affirmations, "Oh no!", "Good," and "I can't believe that" were on frequent repeat. Finally, she said, "Well, I'm glad you're all right. Let us know if you need anything." Then she hung up.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"Your Uncle Chris," She said as she put the phone down, "A tree fell on their house last night."

"Oh wow," I said, "They're alright?"

"Yeah, just shaken. They're going to need a completely new roof, though. It barely missed them in their beds. It's that big tree in their front yard that fell."

Mom spoke like I'd been there a few weeks ago, but we were never close to Dad's other brother, Chris. They lived out in Moody, over thirty minutes away, and my siblings and I had never gotten along with our cousins, Andrew and Daniel. I hadn't been to Andrew and Daniel's house in close to five years by that point, and I could barely remember their house passed the large, white living room and my cousins', Andrew and Daniel, bedrooms. One of their rooms was fishing themed with a talking fish on the wall.

“Look at this,” my cousin Andrew said, beaming as he showed us another fish trophy on the wall, “I caught that.”

We all smiled with fanned interest. Hannah, Nick, and I could count on one hand the number of times we went fishing. However, that was basically all Andrew and Daniel did, Uncle Chris being really into fishing. They were also able to watch and do whatever they wanted. They cussed and called their parents by their first names. They were like night and day to Hannah, Nick, and I, so it was no wonder we didn’t mesh.

I also barely remember Uncle Chris and Aunt Sandy’s room. I went in there once to watch TV with my cousins at a birthday party. It was pitch black in there other than the blue glare of the TV, so the room was perpetually dark in my mind. All these faded memories, along with a tree going through the roof that I didn’t even remember, formed a very warped and abstract image in my mind.

“He and your dad think it might have been a small tornado.”

I wanted to say, “Dang, that’s so cool! Did he say what it was like?”

Instead, I let out was a simple, “Dang....”

“Yeah. They woke up to the storm. They thought it might be a tornado, but the tree fell before they could get to safety. They’re lucky to be alive.”

“They are.” I then yawn, “What are you doing up, by the way?”

“Fell asleep down here after your dad finally went to bed last night, and he woke me up on the way out.” This wasn’t unusual for mom. She liked to stay up late doing her own thing after we all went to bed. She enjoyed shows like Criminal Minds, CSI, and Numbers that she’d stay up late watching since she couldn’t watch them with us, but she often fell asleep on the couch before she made it upstairs to the bedroom. “He wanted

me to report the power outage, but Chris called before I could. I should call them real quick.”

She called, and I waited silently, studying the trees outside the window. Soft morning light from the windows turned the dark living room to gray. We weren't typically alone in the morning, Mom having a predisposition to sleep past 10 a.m. She'd always been late since she stayed up so late and slept heavily. She failed a class in college because she couldn't wake up in time for her 8 a.m. class. That never surprised Hannah, Nick, or me one bit. As kids, she'd fall asleep reading and doing school with us way more often than she would care for me to admit. However, she started falling asleep while driving, so she went to the doctor for a sleep study. She had sleep apnea. Solution: CPAP machine. It literally changed her life. No, changed our lives. Mom went from a snippy grump to a reasonable human being.

It's amazing what a little bit of sleep can do for someone.

“They say it will be on by 2 p.m., so we'll see,” Mom sighed. I nod, and the conversation stills into silence.

Hannah and Nick were still asleep, which wasn't unusual either. They stayed up much later than I did. I noticed early on that if I got up early, I could get started on my homework, finishing sooner, or give myself some time to do what I wanted before Mom got up and forced me to do school. That last option happened the most often. But that morning, we just sat in silence, staring out the window—a moment of alone time with her and a moment to avoid working on school.

The sun was already rising high into the sky, and everything looked bright and springy. But the trees still bent against the howling wind. A question that I'd wanted to

ask Dad inched back to the forefront of my mind, “Was that it?” I asked. As bad as it was, I wanted there to be more. I didn’t want the storm to just happen to Uncle Chris. I wanted storms to happen to us, storms that I didn’t sleep through but could feel the rush and excitement as they approached.

“Depends,” Mom says slowly, almost quietly, “Your dad said this wasn’t supposed to be the bad stuff, but we just don’t know.”

Silence. We continued to stare at the wind and listen to it whistle through the trees and around the house. The trees already looked like they would snap. I’ve never seen wind like that outside of a storm. Usually, dark clouds filled the sky before a storm, but that day the sun shone bright, and the sky was clear. Dad told me once that the sun shining before a storm leads to greater instability and thus more storms.

It seemed like a setup for the worst.

February 2001

“There’s going to be a tornado today,” I told mom as I rushed into her bathroom with excitement to tell her about my prediction after having observed the dark sky and swaying trees out the living room window. I was six, and there was a homeschool Valentine’s Day party with our homeschool cover school.

“No, I don’t think there will be today,” Mom dismissed as she leaned over the counter and attempted to apply eyeliner beneath her grey-blue eyes. The room smelt strongly of her perfume and hair spray that always made my nose tickle, my stomach turn, and my head hurt. That didn’t stop me from pestering her.

“But the trees are bending!” I said, pointing to the window, where a gust of wind just sent the trees swirling into a frantic dance.

“Dad said we’d be fine. Stop worrying.”

I didn’t believe her. I had seen how the wind howled all morning and how the trees bent in the wind. That only happened when tornados were coming. I was very proud of this sort of sixth sense, and it rarely proved me wrong. There would be tornados somewhere in the area if the trees bent and the wind howled.

Further, I was not worried as Mom had said. I had never been scared of storms. Once when I was four, Dad had picked me up early from school, as I was in pre-school at that time, and explained to me the danger of the storm headed our way. Even then, I wasn’t scared. I just looked out the window of Dad’s car and stared wide-eyed at the looming dark clouds in the distance. Time and time again. I’d watch as the clouds rolled by as I waited for something amazing to happen. I was never afraid of death, perhaps because the storms always missed us or because my innocence and youth made me feel untouchable, but I believe the way Dad perked up at each oncoming storm contributed to my interest as well. He was the dad on the front porch for every storm, dying for a look. If the storm looked close on the radar, he’d be outside just in case there was a chance he could see a tornado. This piqued my interest as well. If a tornado was so big and so grand, then I wanted to see it too.

I was never scared, just curious.

Despite my warning, we went to the Valentine’s Day party at our homeschool cover school. Little Valentine’s Day bags were set up for all the kids attending in a church’s family life center, emphasizing the fact it was St. Valentine’s Day as it was a

Catholic homeschool cover school. In my excitement for little notes from people I hardly knew, I'd forgotten about my ominous prediction on the weather. The letters had entertained me for a while, with Mom helping Hannah and me by placing each of the notes we'd brought into the bags. Nick rode happily on her hip, a bit too young to participate. Once we were done, however, I'd immediately gotten board. Joseph, a kid I'd gone to private school within kindergarten, was there. He'd started homeschooling not long after I had, so we had a sort of bond over our experiences. I also didn't have social anxiety then and played with almost any kids that gave me their time. Our parents started talking, and Joseph and I realized some kids were playing dodgeball out in the gym. We, along with Hannah, immediately ran into the gym and joined in next to the teens and preteens waiting to play the game. I was ready for the adventure and the excitement. I remember one teen bending down and helping me know what to do. I was so excited to be playing with the big kids.

Until our director came over and pulled the other younger kids and me out, "Just roll this ball around," the director said dismissively before leaving us alone in a remote section of the gym. I'd been livid, rolling the ball around to Hannah and another kid with a sour face, glaring at the director and casting longing glances at the older kids. Even then, I'd wanted an adventure and danger.

"It's not fair," I huffed to Joseph and the other kids that had joined me. They stayed silent as we rolled the ball around, but I knew they agreed. Mom soon walked over, face sour as mine. I jumped up and explained my plight, but she huffed at her annoyance, "Well, we're leaving. I didn't come here to watch other people's kids."

We both left mad. “I can’t believe she asked me to keep other people’s kids knowing how I’m in pain like I am. Plus, if she doesn’t want y’all playing with the older kids, then she needs to watch y’all or have something for y’all to do.”

I nodded with agreement, knowing Mom was indeed in a lot of pain from a recent surgery, and glad Mom was also mad at the person who slighted me.

As we walked out the door, the wind started blowing harder, and the trees began to rustle a bit louder.

“We’ve got to get home quickly before this hits,” Mom sighed as we walked to our car.

I smiled. I had been right. Storms were coming.

She drove home in a hurry. Sirens went off as we pulled into the garage and piled into the other side of our basement. In the back of the right side of the basement was a half-finished bathroom. The room was disgusting, and the toilet never worked the whole time we lived there, but there was a little nook on the left side of the bathroom that was the closest to the center of the house and as far away from the tiny bathroom window as possible. There was a fair amount of space there so we could all fit without being crowded around the toilet. Mom got us in there and stood in front of us, so if the window broke, she would get hit, not us.

“Come on, you guys.” Mom snipped, “This is serious.”

Nick cried in her arms while Hannah and I grabbed her legs. Hannah cried, but I didn’t care. I wanted to see it. I tried so hard to look around Mom and her mom jeans to the window, but all I could see was the sheets of rain and the oval-shaped leaves of the

pecan bending in the driving wind. The rain was going sideways, and the little bush in the middle of the yard leaned to one side without a break.

It was a bit thrilling, but it was only a taste that I caught sight of around Mom's legs. Soon it was over.

Straight-line wind. Our power went out, but we were all right.

"Thank goodness, it was only straight-line wind," Mom sighed on the phone with Dad after it passed.

I sit on an old couch, looking at the fallen branches from the basement window. I was disappointed.

*

"You need to go work on your school," Mom said, breaking the silence.

I sighed, "I know." But I also knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything that day. Severe weather days were rarely productive homework days. Also, it wasn't fair. Most schools got to let out for severe weather, but I had to continue to work. Just rude.

"If you don't get your schoolwork done, you won't be able to go to ballroom class or the dance this weekend."

I let out a large, "Ugh!" as I slowly grew to a standing position. I walked over to my school bin in the office area, grabbed my American history book, and settled in on the couch under the window so I could read by the sunlight.

I will be going to that dance class this Friday.

CHAPTER 3

Morganne

“2:40-3:38 p.m. – An EF-4 multiple-vortex tornado moved on a 47-mile track from near Smith Lake through Cullman, north of Simcoe and Fairview, and into Morgan and Marshall Counties, with a one-mile-wide path of destruction and 175 mile per hour peak wind speeds.” – Cullman County Tribune

April 27, 2011

My eyes glazed absently over the lines of my history textbook a few hours later up the room my sister, and I shared. I was trying to finish as much reading as possible to dedicate future, less eventful days to my math and science homework. However, my prediction that I wouldn't be productive that day was accurate. The power had come back well before noon, and after it had come back on, we all kept checking the radar on the TV, watching nervously as the storms inched closer and closer. I had to move upstairs to avoid the temptation to watch TV.

Instead of sitting on my side of the room, I was lying on the floor of Hannah's side of the room while she lay lazily in her bed, also attempting to do school. Her side of the room was my favorite, but maybe that was because I was quickly bored by routine. Plus, I needed conversation to break up the studying.

“What are you going to wear Friday?” I said from a pile of clothes on her floor.

“I don't know. Jeans and a shirt?”

“What shirt, though?”

“That pink one probably,” She said without looking up from her book, “The one I wore Sunday.”

“I like that one! It looks good on you. I’m going to wear that new white one I got.”

“You told me,” She sighed, annoyed as usual. I caught a glimpse of her paper and could see doodles lining the sides of cats and characters with large, anime-like eyes.

“Those are so good!”

She shoved the paper down and narrowed her eyes at me.

“Sorry,” I grumbled and looked back at my paper. Hannah always was protective of her drawings and was the worst at receiving compliments. She seemed to believe that every compliment directed at her was fake, no matter how genuine you said it. It was annoying and something I struggled to understand. I thrived off the compliments, constantly showing off anything I created. Well, everything except my writing. That was never something I shared. It was never ready to share because it was never finished, but I could quickly finish a drawing and be satisfied with it.

I sighed and tried to dig back into my history lesson. While I was committed to going to dance on Friday, my mind was miles away from the textbook describing an uninteresting post-World War America. But I had to stay committed. At least, that is what I told myself as I picked up my phone to answer another text message.

Morganne: Were under a tornado warning

Me: Really 0_0

Morganne: Yeah I’m getting in the basement now haha

“Elizabeth! Hannah!” I quickly put down my phone and pulled my book tight in my hands at Mom’s yell from downstairs, “Get down here quick! There is a tornado on the TV.”

Hannah and I dropped everything and ran downstairs to join Nick and Mom piled around the TV, transfixed by the twisting cyclones. James Spann talked, but none of us heard him. The dark funnel seemed motionless as it twisted in the center of the screen. First, just one, then two cyclones, spinning around each other in a pinwheel-like dance. My whole life, I’d heard James Spann ask to see the Skycams only to find a storm rain-wrapped, too far away, or just off-screen. Cell phones were just becoming good enough to record decent video in 2011, so the only tornados I’d seen were the ones on the Weather Channel filmed by professional storm chasers with professional cameras, making tornados even more mythical and untouchable. Tornados were more like a special effect used in a movie than a natural weather phenomenon. But this time, we had front row seats to an actual tornado caught with a camera on a building.

You could see little pieces of building flying on the edges of the clouds.

Morganne. I looked down at my phone.

Me: I see it on the TV!!! Are you alright????

*

Around March 15, 2011

I sat alone among a sea of empty chairs and students, feeling the waves of conversations flood over me, reminding me that I was very, very alone. I fiddled with my hands, rubbing the cold metal legs on the underside of the plastic chair and watching the room. High school girls in oversized shirts and short jean shorts laughed with other

equally as trendy girls. Boys played on the foosball tables. They all knew each other from school or church, but I had no one. There wasn't anyone I knew at this retreat. Not one person. I stared at the door, hoping desperately that at least one person I knew would show up, but no one did.

I'd signed up for the retreat in hopes that my crush, Teddy, would be there. Teddy was a guy from my church I'd had a crush on for two years before this retreat since the 8th grade. His family moved to our church when I was in the 8th grade, and his parents taught my 8th grade Sunday school class. He was in 9th grade, a football player, cute, polite, witty, and funny. He used to talk to me a bit whenever I came into class before he went over to the high school class. Our parents also started talking, and my little dreamer mind, lonely from losing all my friends around that time, started weaving all sorts of stories about us. Crippling anxiety, however, kept me from ever being myself around him. He'd slowly lost interest, just like everyone else. That didn't stop me from dreaming and hoping one day he'd change his mind.

He'd gone to this retreat the previous year. I begged Mom to let me go, but she told me I'd need to wait till I was older before I went. Well, now I was older, and he was nowhere to be seen. I think he'd had a track meet or something cool like that. He was always doing such cool things while I was stuck at home, a nobody. And now, I was stuck there with a bunch of dumb kids from other churches who were all friends with all the other dumb kids and didn't have time to make friends with a new dumb kid.

They not only didn't have time for a new dumb kid, but they had laughed at me. My eyes fell on the teens I'd met only a few minutes prior. I'd made one glaring mistake: I said I was homeschooled.

Instantly, the interest faded from their eyes, and I saw them trying to inch away. I groped at some way to keep them. After all, they had come up and asked me who I was, but I had no way of continuing the conversation. There was no shared interest. I couldn't ask them about their schools because I didn't know, and they couldn't ask me about mine.

But even once they left, I followed. It wasn't my best moment, but desperation drove me. They went to a foosball table, and I stood behind them. One of the boys I was standing behind saw me, smiled, and then elbowed his friend. He turned to see me and laughed, shaking his head.

I left instantly. With nowhere else to go, I choose a lonely chair on the side of the room.

The retreat refused to start, and all I could think about were their eyes, their glazed disinterest, and instant regret in talking with me. I sat there for what seemed like an hour, trying to figure out how to navigate the many many students I didn't know. The space between them and me seemed to grow into an unsurmountable ravine. Who would want to talk with a lonely homeschooler? My heart raced, and my stomach knotted.

I was always on the outside. I could never break the ice enough for people to know me. They saw my stutters and shakes, the weakness, and wanted nothing to do with it. This had all started in junior high. I'd walked into my Sunday school class expecting to sit next to the girl I'd always sat next to for the past four years, only to be left alone in the front of the room. That year, I realized I was different. That year, people started changing, and I was stuck being a kid. Everyone started getting cell phones and wearing more adult-looking clothes, but I wasn't even allowed to wear a skirt over my knees.

It was all because I was homeschooled. It was all because Mom forced me into this situation where I was different and alone.

These thoughts crashed and eroded at my strength that day, blurring the retreat into one large storm. I floundered from one event to the next in a blur of panic and missed opportunities. I could barely move. I could barely speak. Retreats usually consisted of talks that were then divided into small groups so people could talk about what they “got” from the talk. I’d tried to introduce myself in my small group, but the words froze in my mouth. I can’t remember any of the talks, probably because nothing was new. I knew more about Catholicism than most adult Catholics. I sat there wondering when I’d be able to return to the dorm rooms. However, when we finally got back to the dormitory, there were more people than I’d ever been around before, especially in my sleeping area, talking and ignoring my existence. I lay in bed, so painfully aware of every move I made and how awkward it was to be alone and unsure of everything I did. They saw that weakness. They saw it and wanted nothing to do with it. I lay in bed. Praying I’d sleep. Praying it would all disappear, and I would be home in my bed soon.

CREEAAKKKK. I jolted up in my bunk, sure of my impending death, only to realize a large chaperone had just rolled over on the bunk above me. Why such a large woman had chosen a top bunk was beyond me. Her bags had been up there when I’d arrived, so I picked the corner bottom bunk. You know... the one away from everyone. Meaning this woman chose a top bunk despite her size. I mean, it’s a free country, but these beds didn’t look like the soundest bunk beds in the world. I wish she’d asked to switch or something. It would have been better than wondering if the bed would give out from then on out.

I settled back down in my bed, hoping to dip back to sleep, but the storm returned. If I wasn't worried about dying under the chaperone's weight, I was worried about her dying from affixation since she was snoring so loud. I was worried about the shower I'd have to inevitably take at some point in the next two days. I was worried about every syllable I'd spoken in my small group and shaky encounter with another human, of all the missed opportunities from when I'd been asked a question, unable to think of a good answer. I couldn't get out of my mind how the girls in my cabin had pointedly ignored me despite sleeping in the beds next to mine.

I wanted to go home.

*

Morning brought the same fog and the same waves of panic at each conversation and reflection. I don't remember the talks. I don't remember the "bonding" activities we'd played. I don't remember God at all. I just remember trying desperately to pull my boat together and just sail normally on the waters that everyone else seemed to have such firm control over. Then, a conversation over lunch pushed the clouds away.

"Oh, that's cool. There are a lot of homeschoolers at my church."

Blinking, I turned to the first non-homeschooler who had not immediately turned away at the mention of my unfortunate circumstances.

"Really?" What was her name? She had said it. Morganne maybe?

"Yeah, we have a few families that homeschool that come to our youth group."

A smile crept up my face as the storm slowly vanished altogether. My mind for once cleared and saw her face as something other than a threat. Her features were soft, not caked in make-up, and her long brown, thin hair wasn't done in any way remarkable.

She had braces like me. Slowly, I began to talk freely. She knew. She knew about the awkwardness and did not care. The more we talked, the more relaxed I became and the more we connected.

We weren't in the same small group, nor did we have the same cabin, but we started eating together and sitting together for the talks. That Saturday was rainy, but Morganne and I walked around the lake together despite the drizzle. We talked and laughed through the soaking rain. We talked about our crushes and the dance class I attended. She said they did some ballroom dances at her church youth group, and they even had an Oktoberfest where there was frequently ballroom dancing. I asked her about public school, and she asked me about being homeschooled.

Even though it was raining, I finally escaped the storm.

*

April 27, 2011 - 3:40 p.m.

Morganne: Were alright. It missed us by a good bit.
Was still scary.

CHAPTER 4

TOUCH DOWN

“Now Fidello and Nel were great runners and were two of the fastest in Mantut. But not even speed could save a human from an elf overtaking him. If they didn’t get to Moonkissed forest soon, they were toast.” – Section from “Fidello’s Flight 2” last saved July 19, 2010

April 27, 2011

Pleasant Grove was a nothing town — a barely have a Dollar General town. Moreover, being homeschooled meant I knew only a handful of people; most of them were my cousins, Katie, Alex, and Ian. However, Dad seemed to know everyone in our town. He grew up in an even smaller town in Minor, Alabama, about 8 miles from Pleasant Grove. Every time we went to the store, he’d see someone he knew, usually a childhood friend who’d moved to Pleasant Grove or someone he’d played ball who never left the town. Dads at Nick’s ballgames knew Dad without introduction. I would know they knew Dad from childhood when they’d say to me, “Your Squirrel’s kid,” with that sweet, deep southern accent. If they didn’t know Dad, they knew Uncle Mike, Katie, Alex, and Ian’s dad, or Uncle Chris, who had the tree fall on his house. So, the Slatskys were well known in Pleasant Grove.

But I knew no one.

I'd always done ballet or gymnastics, and to do those things, we had to go all the way to Hoover, thirty minutes away. Mom ran herself ragged, getting us to the multiple different practices across town every night. It's no wonder she rarely had the energy to drive us to visit our friends outside of sporting events.

It didn't help that she was in chronic pain for most of our childhood. I mentioned she had surgeries before, but I did not elaborate. However, Mom's storm remains unprocessed, pushed to the backs of our memory, never to resurface.

In 1999, Nick was born dead.

Blue. Not breathing. Not crying. Dead.

The doctor failed to inform Mom of the risks of having v-back. Namely, that there was a good chance, her uterus might rupture, and it did. Mom talks about how the doctors suddenly paled and how they started rushing her to the operating room, telling her little to nothing. They were having an issue finding Nick's heartbeat as well. They got him out, no idea how long he'd been without oxygen. His shoulder had been in Mom's abdomen, outside of her uterus.

Yet, by a miracle, they revived him, and he doesn't let you forget that he's already died once. It's that fun fact he likes to pull out at parties, along with the fact he almost killed our mom.

I was four when this happened. I remember the blur of different hospital rooms, ICUs, and the Barbie dolls given to Hannah and me as gifts "from our brother." I remember holding him when he came home. He was small and red, and I didn't want to give him up when it was Hannah's turn to hold him. I didn't know about mom almost dying or comprehend the miracle that Nick was alive, not until later.

Everyone always talked about how Nick survived, how he should have had cerebral palsy because he was without oxygen for so long, how he shouldn't be able to speak, or walk, or do anything. Nick was the boy who lived. He was the miracle child. He was the one the doctors and nurses talked about when we went to the doctor's office. Nick could walk with no issues and talk your ears off.

In fact, he never stopped talking. I would be trying to do school in the living room, and he'd poke my arm as he said with each poke, "Sissy! Sissy! Sissy!" until I responded to him. He'd then proceeded to tell me an unnecessary story as fast as humanly possible. His fast speech and mumbling were some of the reasons he was in speech therapy in 2011. He'd slur all his words together and mispronounce some sounds in his effort to tell you the story in his head before you lost interest. Most people couldn't understand him, but Hannah and I could. Sometimes we translate for our parents or other people. The therapist thought that he might have had some of these pronunciation issues and dyslexia because of the lack of oxygen, but we'll never know for sure.

Mom, however, lost her uterus. She'd wanted more kids. They'd tried to save her organs but couldn't. I didn't understand the loss at the time. I didn't understand the mental and physical pain she must have gone through. I just saw a broken mother who couldn't pick me up anymore, who laid in bed or on the couch all the time instead of sitting on the floor and playing with us, who had to hug us gingerly because it killed her for us to touch her stomach, who'd look longingly at every cup of orange juice we drank because she couldn't drink it anymore. She loved orange juice.

One night, I came downstairs to sit with her while she was on the computer.

"Whatcha looking at?" I asked as I sat on the arm of her chair.

“A blog with other women who are struggling with the same pain that I am,” She smiled as she talked about the things she was discovering. Even as a kid, I knew her discovery of this website was huge. I knew she found hope there, maybe even solutions.

Mom tried everything to get us to our sporting events despite her pain. My parents were so desperate for us to have an everyday life, despite being homeschooled, that Mom often sacrificed her comfort to get us to events to meet other kids. She was at every recital, every gymnastics meet, and as many of Nick’s games as she could get to. If she could not go to an event for any reason, we filmed it for her.

Mom was obsessed with pictures and film. She meticulously documented our lives through video and photographs. Every event, big or small, has its documentation. She always said it was because she had such a poor memory, and to be fair, she does. However, I’m sure the hours she watched her grandmother fade away to dementia as a teen and young adult contributed to her desire to document everything. That grandmother had saved her in some of her darkest moments, her closest confidant, and Mom lost her twice. I imagine these pictures were ways that she could hold on to the memories if they ever did begin to fade like Granny’s memories.

It made sense then that one of the few things Mom grabbed when we fled our house on April 27th, 2011, were our baby books, the cameras, and the SD cards.

We rarely left our house for severe weather, even though we didn’t have a place to escape to during tornados. Our basement wasn’t entirely below ground, so we would be completely unprotected if a serious enough tornado was to come through. We used to go to the basement anyway. However, as we got older, we switched over to a small corner of our dining room where the kitchen cabinets met with the wall in the middle of

our main floor; we put the table over us and prayed it would pass. Four walls with one long wall in-between made up the downstairs. There were no closets, no places to hide. If the storms were bad enough, we usually went to Aunt Pam and Uncle Mike's house five minutes away because they had a massive, completely below-the-ground basement. The other option was Mom's parents', my Grammy and Poppy, house equally as close. One perk of Grammy and Poppy's house was that they often weren't home, having basically moved to their lake house in recent years.

I came down to the living room to work, but the TV had been turned to PBS to not "distract us" as much. Mia and Miguel played, reminding me with their bright orange-themed outfits how late in the day it was as that usually came on around 3 or 4 p.m. The bright colors wore at my tired eyes, and the characters' voices grated on my nerves. Dad had called a few minutes prior, and Mom had hung up, nervous, "There is a bad storm in Tuscaloosa. He's worried about it, so he's coming home."

"Are we leaving?" Nick asked, perking up on the couch.

"Maybe, but we're not going to Katie and Alex's," Mom said sternly, "Y'all are way too behind in school for that."

Nick and I groaned in unison, but Mom's glare shut us up quickly. I tried to refocus on homework, studying church history with lazy eyes. The names of apostles and early martyrs went through my eyes and into an abyss in my mind. Instead, the part of my mind that should have been reading the words processed the possibilities of what my parents would do. A small part wondered if I could convince Mom to change her mind. I thought I was good at reasoning and was sure that my parents would not want to bring our cat and dog to my grandmother's house. Grammy struggled with a lung disease and

could not be around cats or dogs at all, while Aunt Pam and Uncle Mike were fine with cats and dogs. Maybe if they decided to leave, I could change their minds.

The front door opened and closed almost a half-hour later. Before Dad even put down his things, he walked into the living room and asked us to turn the TV to the storm. Mom quickly did, and he stared for a while with his hands on his hips. James Spann yelled about how dangerous this storm was, blazer off and suspenders out.

“So?” Mom said next to him.

“We got to make a decision now. Are we staying or going?”

“You’re going to have to make a decision,” anxiety added a slight edge to her voice, “I don’t know enough about the weather to know if we need to leave.”

Dad sighed. I knew that sigh. It was his stressed sigh, usually accompanied by mumbling as he attempted to process the mess in his head. However, today he just remained silent for a few moments, “We have to go. It’s just too bad.” Butterflies rose in my stomach, and a smile crept onto my face. An adventure. “Kids!” Dad said, turning around then noticing Hannah wasn’t downstairs. He called up to her, and before she was downstairs, Dad continued, “We need to go. We’re leaving. Get anything that matters to you.”

“Can’t we go to Alex and Katie’s?” I asked.

“Grammy and Poppy’s,” Mom said firmly. I began to groan, but her glare stopped me, “This is not the time. Get your stuff. We need to go!”

I pushed back the annoyance and ran up to my room. I already had some clothes on, my favorite tied dye yellow tee shirt, ill-fitting jeans, and a tight sports bra, not being able to work on school without putting on real clothes. I looked around my messy room.

Clothes lay everywhere, but I didn't care about my clothes. I did not care about the trinkets on top of the dresser or the stuffed animals that lay in the corner. I reached under my bed to gather the most important thing I owned: my thoughts. I pulled out the notebooks filled with my stories along with my diaries and placed them into a backpack. I could buy new things, but my thoughts printed in my horrible, purple manuscript were irreplaceable.

A list of items my family decided to bring:

Mom:

- Each of our baby books
- SD cards
- Portable hard drives
- Camera
- Camcorder
- Cellphone
- Dog
- Small bin for cat box
- Peanut butter and crackers

Dad:

- Cell phone
- Weather radio
- Flashlights and lanterns

Me:

- Notebooks full of my stories

- Cell phone
- Purse
 - Period Pads
 - Wallet
 - Pink lipstick
 - Rosary
 - Various junk

Hannah

- Cat
- Statue of St. Frances and St. Therese
- Small crucifix
- Stuffed animals
 - Sparky
 - Little bear
 - Blanky

Nick

- Nintendo DS
- Nintendo DS games
- Portable DVD player
- Tangled

It's an exciting list to analyze, don't you think? We focused on the things that mattered to us, knowing there was SOME chance that we wouldn't be back. However, I'm sure you can look at the list and see some crucial items are missing. We had a lot of

trust that we would be coming back. I don't remember knowing how bad Tuscaloosa had been before we left, other than they were terrible. In my mind, our exodus was going to be like the time we ran from Dad's parent's little three-bedroom house in Minor to Aunt Pam and Uncle Mike's house during my grandparent's Christmas party, or like the countless times, we banked on it missing us by hiding in the dining room or basement.

Even though the house buzzed with anticipation, there was a part of me that felt like it was all for nothing. We'd be back in a few minutes, and school and choirs would resume.

Adventure over. Not only over, but a complete waste.

As we piled in the car, I sat on the edge of my seat, face glued to the window as the sky turned dark. The sirens blared. The wind hissed. The rain plopped on the windshield in big thick drops, but it wasn't heavy yet. We passed almost no one on the road. Anxiety consumed the car from the dog panting heavily to the cat meowing in the plastic kennel in Hannah's lap to Dad and Mom snapping at each other.

Mom waved her hands frantically as Dad stopped at a stop sign before the main road, "Don't worry about stopping!"

"I'm not going to wreck!" Dad growled as a car passed in front of us.

Well, everyone except for Hannah, Nick, and me.

"Look at the trees!" I gasped as we drove, a giggle in my throat as I watched the trees bend in the wind.

"There's a UPS man!" Nick exclaimed from next to me.

"He needs to get to shelter," Dad mumbled from the front as he finally turned on the road.

Hannah gazed out of the window of the back row of the van in silent wonder, closely grasping the cat, Duchess, in her cage. If she said anything, her words were buried beneath everyone else's words.

Maybe our innocence lulled us into a false sense of safety, but a fire lit up our eyes as we gapped at the storm. We'd done this drill close to a hundred times over the years. We'd be back in a few hours; everything okay. This was just a chance to avoid doing homework for a bit.

"Okay," Mom said as we began to pull up the house in the rain, "Y'all need to go in and get the garage door open so Hannah and I can go in with the cat and dog."

We all nodded. Dad grabbed the keys. Mom held on tightly to the leash, and Hannah clutched the crate. We opened the car door and ran, through the garage, through the entrance to the house with the bell on it, the bell ringing behind us as we ran through, down into the dark basement, through the unfinished bottom garage, and opened the door. Mom and Hannah burst through, covered in thick raindrops.

We rush back into the finished portion of the basement, where Dad was trying desperately to get an ancient TV in the basement to start up. It was vintage, to put it nicely, so old it had to warm up before you could see anything.

"Is there a TV that works in this house?"

"I don't know! Try their bedroom," Mom said dismissively, "Get in the closet! I don't want y'all out here."

I slowly walked towards the closet, trying to hang back in the main living room portion of the basement as long as I could. My grandparent's basement was quite large, consisting of a little living room, a large bedroom, and a long closet. The closet was a

long room with a curtain at the end of it that hid boxes. The rest of it had been a playroom for the grandkids. It consisted of a mechanical rocking horse with springs, two mirrors set up so that you could stare into infinitely, and toys and clothes from the 1950s-80s. Hannah, Nick, and I momentarily got distracted by the clothes, putting them on and laughing about the games we used to play down there with Mom's sister's kids.

"I can't believe these are still here," I laughed, trying to hide my shaking hands as I wrapped a shawl I used to wear all the time around my shoulders. It was a royal blue with large pink roses and gold paisley patterns that crowned the shawl's edges. I used to feel like a princess each time I wore it, or a wealthy movies star that lived in a lavash house with everything I ever wanted. Hannah grabbed a white shirt she used to wear as a dress and spun around in the mirrors at the other end of the closet to see how it looked. It still hung big around her petite body.

"Look! I remember playing with this." Nick said, holding up a tin, yellow hard hat that he put on his head. It still covered his eyes a bit.

"This is coming straight for Hueytown, Sylvan Springs, and Pleasant Grove. I can't stress it enough that you need to be in a safe place. This storm has a history of intense damage. Get into the lowest level of your home, and don't move till you receive an all-clear." I wandered back out to the living room as James Spann's voice filtered through the TV. The TV was still not entirely in focus, but through the fog, I could see he was pointing to the vicinity of our city. However, it seemed like it was going to miss us on the radar. Too far north. Was probably going towards Sylvan Springs. A waste again, I sigh to myself.

Just then, we were plunged into darkness.

Dad rushed down the stairs and to the basement door. We all perked up and started running to the door as well, desperate to catch a glimpse, but Mom shewed us back to the closet, “No, why are you even out of the closet? We have to get in the closet. And put on your helmets!”

We grumbled but rushed back to the closet, turning on the lanterns that lay on the floor. Our hands shook as we strapped on our bike helmets. My brother’s helmet took us a second as Hannah and I had to loosen his enough to fit on his growing head. Right as we finished strapping his on, Dad screamed from the other room, “I saw it! I saw it!” He ran into the closet, “We need to all get down and pray.”

It was the way he said it. The way his voice shook just a bit, and the way he looked down at the floor and not at us as he sat down. Dad never was scared during storms. Dad never told us to pray before storms. The closet fell silent. It didn’t seem like a waste now. Maybe I was getting the adventure I’d longed for.

My family began to mumble Hail Marys to ourselves. The prayer silently worked on my lips while my ears waited.

Then I heard it. The roar. It was faint and distant but a roar. The legendary sound of a freight train that all the storm chasers talked about on the Weather Channel.

Hail Mary, full of grace,

We waited

The Lord is with thee.

For the noise to become defining,

Blessed art though among women,

For the house to fall on our heads.

And blessed is the fruit of your womb,

It didn't.

Jesus.

The roar faded.

Holy Mary,

We waited.

Mother Of God,

And waited.

Pray for us sinners,

Dad moved, "I'm going to go check."

Now and at the hour of our death...

Mom nodded. We held our breaths.

Amen.

"It's gone."

We collectively took a breath.

Mom made us wait a bit longer, but I had to look. I needed out of the basement and the darkness. I had to see.

Eventually, we all wandered to the basement door and peaked out.

Insulation and paper lay all over the backyard. Dad held a piece in his hand, "It's from Tuscaloosa."

CHAPTER 5

TRAPPED

“They’ve got the roads blocked off,” Dad sighed, “We can’t get to the house.”

Dad had just come back from trying to get into our neighborhood. Even walking, he said police were preventing anyone in or out of the area around our house. The roadblock left us with a looming question:

Did we have a home?

After the tornado passed, we slowly wandered out into the evening, the world still dark from the storm, but the setting sun peaked out from under the clouds creating an ominously peaceful evening. All the neighbors began to wander out as well, assessing the damage, if any. Mom would not let us pick up the debris, so we would stand over it closely to see where it was from. Mostly, it was pieces of loose paper, leaves, branches, and shingles. Some of my grandparent’s next-door neighbors with leaf blowers were already blowing the debris into piles at the edges of the yards.

“Some of the roof is damaged,” Dad said, looking up at my grandparent’s roof.

Mom sighed, “I’ll let Dad know. If I could just get a hold of them.” She looked disgruntled at the phone and tried dialing again. I looked at my phone. The text I tried to send my friends, Morganne and Tiffany, my best friend from ballroom, to let them know we were safe remained unsent on my phone. My parents made call after call and sent text after text in attempts to reach family members since the storm had come through, but neither the cell phones nor the landlines were working. In an age of constant connection,

it was bizarre to be unable to contact people. We had no idea how bad the damage was, and we were all itching to find out.

The sound of fire trucks, ambulances, and police sirens blared nonstop since we'd emerged from the basement. It was eerie and the first sign that something was terribly wrong. Even then, before I had seen the extent of the damage, wonder and shock wrapped me into a jittery daze. And Dad was no different.

“Look at that!” He said, pointing across the street, “There is a 2x4 stuck in the ground.”

All our eyes fell to a long piece of wood sticking up out of the ground in the yard across the street. I'd never seen damage like that. I can remember limbs bigger than Dad falling from our pecan tree, but never 2x4s and never stuck straight in the ground. Dad had gone over to look at it and then, having talked with the homeowner, had brought us over to see. I remember vaguely feeling weird about inspecting the 2x4, but once I was over there, I gapped at how the 2x4 towered over me and how it was solidly stuck in the ground. Dad had tried to move it and couldn't. How did something so large become so wedged in the ground?

We walked back over to my grandparent's yard, and Mom was on the phone with her parents. She was telling them about their house and the little bit of damage they had.

“I'm going to try to get into our neighborhood,” Dad said after we got back over to Mom.

I perked up, “Can I come?”

“No,” Dad said, “It's too dangerous. I'm walking, and I don't know when another storm will come through. Stay here with your mom.”

I huffed and followed him as he started alone down the road until he was out of sight. We waited in the humid air for what seemed like ages, continuing to search through the debris for pieces of paper from Tuscaloosa. What else could we do? The power was out, cell service was down, and how could I begin to write about an adventure when I was living one? Plus, looking through the debris was like a treasure hunt, just one I didn't want to think too hard about. Because if I did, I would realize we were looking at the bits and pieces of other peoples' homes. Soon, the neighbor's leaf blowers blew the debris into piles along the road. That left us to either sit outside, listening to the sirens or wander around our grandparent's darkening home.

Dad appeared on the road again way too quickly; we knew there was no way he'd be able to get in. Not long after that, he tried to get into the car to get pizza. Police had roadblocks set up at every road that led in or out of Pleasant Grove. No one was allowed in or out to prevent looters. However, that also meant that pizza delivery couldn't get in.

And that was a problem.

We only bought a few packs of peanut butter and crackers as I mentioned before. It wasn't even enough for all of us. "I should have packed more," Mom sighed as she, Hannah, Nick, and I climbed the stairs to raid her parents' pantry. Mom's parents currently lived at their lake house on Smith Lake, about an hour and a half north of Pleasant Grove. The lake house was like a dollhouse, full of light and soft blue and yellow furniture. Grammy had a refined taste in furniture and style, and I'd always admired it. However, the Pleasant Grove house was anything but bright. It backed up to a wooded area, and light rarely pierced the windows of this house. It was full of shadowy corners, dark wood floors and carpet, stone fireplaces, porcelain figurines, and pictures

from the 1800s through the 1990s. While a part of me liked the antique atmosphere the Pleasant Grove house embodied, it left one feeling a bit depressed and anxious. It was no wonder that my grandparents spent so much time at the lake house over the Pleasant Grove house.

“Let’s see what we got in here,” Mom mumbled, opening the white double doors to my grandparent’s pantry. Boxes of food, jars of jam, various baking supplies, parchment paper, and aluminum foil filled the little pantry. Mom pulled out some crackers and shined a flashlight on the box.

“It’s expired,” she sighed, “Maybe it’s not too bad.”

She opened a box, passed me a cracker, and together we tried some of the crackers.

We both spit out the crackers, immediately searching for water to wash out our mouths.

“Play-dough!” I spit, “I never thought crackers could taste like that.”

“Me either,” Mom coughed with a bitter laugh.

“Let me try!” My brother said, grabbing a cracker, along with Hannah. They both spit it out immediately.

Every box we picked up. Expired. Everything was so old that you couldn’t even try it, or if you did, it tasted so bad that you immediately spit it out.

“How is all of this expired?” I asked, feeling the hunger begin to bite in my stomach, “It’s not like they’re never here.”

Mom shrugged, “I don’t know. I guess they just buy new groceries each time and eat it all. I figured they would have had something, though.”

Finally, we found some 100-calorie packs that taste less like playdough than everything else we'd tried. I could still taste a hint of the chewy taste of playdough; however, the edge in my stomach led me to force them down along with the peanut butter crackers. It took all my strength to keep down the comment that if we'd gone to Katie and Alex's house, we'd have food.

After our "dinner," we went downstairs, and Nick pulled out the DVD player to watch *Tangled*. We'd gotten the movie for Easter just a few days prior, and it was the current obsession of our whole family. I was obsessed with it, having listened to the soundtrack repeatedly since watching the movie. We all huddled in the closet downstairs, watching the blonde princess twirl around about being freed from her abuser while our parents tried desperately to contact someone who could check on the house. *Tangled* hadn't left my mind the past few days, giving rise to a few new story ideas and inspiring me to continue to write on *Atallas*. However, the movie passed in front of my eyes like the textbooks had earlier that day. My mind could not rest after everything that had happened. All that I remember is my thoughts racing through different scenarios in the harsh glow of the DVD player in the dark basement while the radio played through weather forecasts.

We still had to have an ear out for the weather because the storms weren't done. The problem with this specific line of storms was that the storm that hit us wasn't the main line of storms. The storm that hit us had popped up in front of the main line in a series of supercell storms. That was never good. Those storms were the kind of storms that made James Spann take his jacket off and roll up his sleeves. I don't know the science behind it. I just know what my Dad has told me. There is something more

threatening in the way these storms popped up out of nowhere versus a steady line that might or might not bring a tornado with it. So, in some ways, we were still waiting to see if we'd get hit again or not.

However, it soon passed with only a bit of rain and thunder. Uneventful, though I can't say I complained too much about that. Soon I went upstairs and into the kitchen where my parents stayed after "dinner." The kitchen was the only place to find cell service, and it appeared that Dad had finally reached someone. His shoulder pressed his phone against his cheek while he held a flashlight over a map with one hand and the index finger of his other hand scanned the map.

"Whose he on the phone with?" I asked Mom, who sat at the barstool not far from him.

"Your Uncle Mike," Mom whispered; neither of us wanted to interrupt a conversation that could at any moment lose connection. I listened for a second and could tell they were trying to triangulate the damage Uncle Mike saw with the roadblocks and the location of our home. Stress flowed from Dad as he stared intently at the map, and I sat there trying to decipher the half conversation I was hearing. Dad soon hung up. Deflated. He pulled Mom aside to talk to her in hushed tones, and I took that as my cue to talk a walk down the hall for the second.

Pictures from my grandparent's baby pictures to Mom's elementary school pictures from the 70s adorned the hallway outside the kitchen. Colorized photos of my grandparent's baby pictures and the other old pictures in the light of my flashlight produced an unsettling atmosphere. Usually, these pictures fascinated me as they represented a time before I could remember, and I loved seeing Mom dressed

convincingly like a boy during her tomboy stage. She said her Mom used to get told, “What a cute son you got there?” by people in check outlines. She said it would drive her Mom mad, and she loved every minute of it. She grew out of it in high school, though, but she’s still a bit of a tomboy at heart, unlike me.

However, I’d never seen Grammy and Poppy’s with all the lights off. There were times when I’d been there late at night, but never with all the lights out. Now, the portraits and the long shadows coupled with the sirens in the distance concocted a spooky feeling from it all. It didn’t help that my grandmother always had a witchy sort of vibe to her.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yeah!” I called, gladly pulling myself away from the haunted hallway and back into the safety of the occupied kitchen.

“Can you get your siblings?” Mom asked, her and Dad’s faces grim.

I ran to the doorway and called into the dark abyss for them. They quickly appeared out of the darkness, and all of us gathered in the candle-lit kitchen.

After a few seconds, Dad sighed, “Well, we don’t want to worry y’all, but we might not have a house.”

The news washed over me. I wasn’t sad. I wasn’t worried. I was curious. Finally, the adventure I’d craved. The opportunity to experience something I hadn’t before. The crazy thing that never happened to me happened to me. I wanted to see it, to feel it. I shook not with fear but excitement. I almost wanted the house to be gone. Then we could finally move out of that Dollar General town and start over with a completely new life. I had my stories and my family. What else did I need?

*

“Don’t touch me!” She snapped as she kicked my leg away and clutched the covers tight around her.

“I didn’t mean to.” I whispered harshly, turning over to face away from her and pulling my legs up to my chest so that they wouldn’t accidentally stray into my sister’s bubble. That would be the position I would stay in for the rest of the night. Back aching. Bra cutting into my ribs because I was too embarrassed to sleep braless. Jeans catching on the rough sheets. Afraid to move in case I woke the ticking time bomb that slept next to me.

I’d last slept in the same bed as Hannah in a cheap hotel for a gymnastics meet. Hannah did not appreciate how I sprawled out when I slept, most of the time unintentionally. She’d push me away violently with a whiney, “Stop!” for my transgression. Before that, Mom’s sister had given us a full-sized bed when we were little, and she dared put us in the same bed. That hadn’t lasted very long. I’d bumped and pushed Hannah to annoyance after a few weeks. She’d ended up with a twin bed, and I somehow lucked out with the full bed.

Tonight appeared no different, except now I wasn’t going to sleep. For the whole night, helicopters passed overhead before pattering away into the distance, and ambulances’ shrill cries pierced through the sound of humming generators. The sounds seemed to amplify the eerie silence that enveloped the dark house.

One thought, however, plagued my mind: “Did I have a house?”

The not knowing kept my mind buzzing. Were the painfully uncomfortable clothes I wore the only ones I had? Well, I could buy more. We have insurance. But what

will I do until then? Stop it. You don't even know if you don't have a house. But what about that shirt I bought last week? I was going to wear it this Friday. What if I don't even get to go to dance class this Friday! It's the last class before summer break. I shouldn't think about that. I don't even know if I have a house. I should be worried about that.

Over and over again, these thoughts cycled through like a bad news feed that you can't stop refreshing in some sick hope things will update, for better or worse. I refused to let myself cry over something I wasn't sure I'd lost, and even then, I couldn't do anything about losing my stuff. It was just stuff. What mattered, my family and my thoughts, rested safely in this house. But that didn't stop me from wondering what happened.

Around midnight, I heard a creak in the hall. I froze in the bed, afraid to open my eyes in case a ghost stood in front of me. But I had to know. Slowly, I opened my eyes and turned to look out the open bedroom door towards the sound. A formless shadow passed up the stairs. My heart started racing, Was that a ghost?! I stared, waiting to see and hear if I heard anything else. Nothing. I could stop staring, though. If I closed my eyes, I might open them again to find a person, pale and unknown to me, standing in my doorway. I couldn't face that. It'd rather live through a million tornadoes than that.

It could have been Mom, I thought to myself, trying to rationalize the shadow. She'd stayed in the basement with the dog and cat. She said she would stay down there, but it's possible she couldn't do it. Maybe she decided to work her way upstairs and hoped the dog and cat would be fine alone in the basement. However, she also said she wouldn't leave the animals down there. It has to be Mom. It couldn't have been a ghost.

The haunted feel from the hallway earlier did nothing to aid in this moment. Suddenly, everything about this house seemed haunted, from the chandeliers to the stone fireplace to vaulted ceilings to the grand stairwell with a little balcony that made you a bit dizzy to stand on. I haven't even mentioned the old photographs that looked like they were brought back from California after a failed western venture that consumed the dining room walls. Their eyes seemed to follow you no matter where you went, but it'd always brushed it off before. In fact, I thought I would have loved to live there for a long time. But now, I wanted out as fast as possible.

After the shadow, I worried about not having a house, waking Hannah up, breathing deeply because my bra was so tight, and ghostly torments.

CHAPTER 6

TREES

“Everything was so wild and untamed. It made Atallas feel energized; she could feel every plant in the garden, and it was like being in a room filled with new people ready to get know her. They needed love and Atallas wanted to give them that.” - Saved file labeled “The Forgotten Garden” last saved July 18th, 2013.

April 28, 2011

“Bring me some Yoshi Plants!” Hannah said from the trunk of the large pecan tree in our backyard. I ran over to a certain section of the yard behind the bush with the stinking flowers, officially known as Carolina Allspice, and found a small little weed. Its petals formed a shape that looked like a character from Super Mario Sunshine, Yoshi. Hannah had named them Yoshi Plants a few years prior, and the name stuck. I brought them to her, and she placed them into the sludge-filled hole in the tree and squashed them with a stick. I left and went to find my own flowers for my own spells.

Nick ran by us, “Guys, come quick! We need to get out of here. Everything is going to explode!”

We quickly vacated the area and gathered into the fig tree where we took off into deep space. We all had our branches, our own spaces in the tree. Hannah usually piloted and fixed the ship while Nick assisted. Generally, I just did my own thing on my little branch. My roles usually weren’t the strongest of characters. I kind of enjoyed being

rescued and feeling the thrill of danger. Occasionally, I was a strong character, but always feminine and usually annoying. I rarely played male characters.

Nick always played a character with speed, usually the hero.

Hannah always played the smart support characters, male or female.

You can psychoanalyze that as you please. I find the way we all fell into certain roles fascinating. I'm sure it has to do with my desire to be as feminine as possible because Mom wasn't, and Hannah's desire to be anything I wasn't.

But since I was the annoying female support most of the time, I often had time to sit there in the branches just staring up into the trees. I loved watching them sway, admiring how they towered so high over my head and the sunlight danced on their leaves. I memorized the way the trees formed in the sky from the pecan, figs, and dogwoods in the backyard, to the longleaf and loblolly pines in the wooded area behind our house, to the Eastern white pines that seemed to grow in threes behind our neighbor's houses, to the sweet gum tree in the yard behind our neighbor's house. It was satisfying, a sort of comfort in knowing that these big sturdy things were always there. When storms came, I'd sit at the window watching fearfully as they swayed, sure each gust would bring one of them down. But they never fell. They were sturdy and sure. They were there for me every time I came home, in the same place I left them.

When I was about ten or eleven, a couple bought the plot of land at the very end of our dead-end street. We'd stood at the screen door as we watched bulldozers bully down trees. I hated it. I hated the couple that bought the land and tore down the woods. I loved those woods, and I couldn't stand how the sun bore down on the street after the trees were gone. It wasn't the same. It wasn't safe anymore. I could see down onto the

streets below, and the cliff that the house was built on was clearly visible. Something about seeing the edge of the cliff was more horrifying than the trees being gone.

It was almost like a bad dream where everything in the world is off just enough that it seems dangerous. Plus, you're naked in front of your family, co-workers, and friends. It was a feeling of exposure, but you can't do anything to fix it. Heck, you didn't even choose to be naked in this wacky world. You were thrust into nakedness.

That was how coming over the hill of our street for the first time after the storm was but five hundred times worse.

We topped the hill on our street and beheld a wasteland of trees and demolished houses from our hill to the next. Everything I'd remembered was gone, and everything was exposed.

The pecan tree in the backyard lay on our house.

The giant oak from the front yard blocked the end of the road.

The longleaf and loblolly pines behind our house lay in our backyard and bottom driveway.

Fallen trees from our neighbor's yard and the wooded area buried our two dogwoods.

Our neighbor's gum tree crashed onto our swing set.

Every tree I'd ever stared up into was gone. Every tree my siblings and I had played in or with was gone. The sun bore down our house now, and the trees that somehow remained standing were nothing but stubs with clothes from destroyed homes strung in them.

“I’m going to walk over there today,” Dad said that next morning, “I don’t care what cop I have to confront. I’m going.”

So, he left for the third time. The sun shone brightly, the chilly air rushed through the spring trees around my grandparent’s house, and the sky taunted us with that clear spring blue. While we waited for news about our house, we all piled in the van with the dog to charge devices. There was only one charging port and four people wanting to charge devices.

“Let me charge mine first,” Mom said sternly, “I need to be able to contact your dad.”

We grumbled but decided to watch Nick play something on the DS while it still had battery. My phone was past dead, and even if it wasn’t, the signal was still spotty. Our dog, Daisy, jumped from person to person as we all tapped our feet and attempted to distract ourselves with conversation and Nick’s game.

The longer we waited, the greater the tension. Soon, we moved on to busy ourselves with our own things. Hours seemed to pass before Mom’s phone finally rang.

“Hello?”

Silence.

More silence.

We all sat at the end of our seats.

“Okay.”

Mom’s face was tense.

“Okay.”

Silence.

“Well, that’s good.”

We slowly inched closer in hopes of hearing something.

“Okay. We will head that way. Love you.”

Mom got off the phone.

“WHAT?” We all blurted out, practically sitting in the front seat with our mom at this point.

“The house is still there, but almost all the trees are down. The pecan in the back is down on the house. Dad called the insurance guy and an inspector to see if it was sound, hopefully, we can figure that out soon. He said it barely missed us. Let’s get in our seats and go. He said there is a path if we go a different way.”

We all quickly got in our seats. I glued myself to the window, ready for the adventure that lay ahead. We had to reroute a few times from fallen trees and lines. A toppled tree covered the road except for a car-sized gap at one place. We got through there, moving out of the storm path for a second. Even there, the streets were filled with branches, fresh green leaves, and pieces of shingles and wood. Then we turned back down Park Road, moving closer again, the debris picking up. Bigger and bigger branches littered the road and yards the closer we got to our house.

Then there was nothing where there should have been something. The only thing left to do was stare, and that we did from the van windows.

Hannah, Nick, and I gaped at the cluttered emptiness as we sat in the car with the dog. Mom parked the car, shocked as we were.

“Y’all stay here,” she said in a firm voice. We started protesting, but she snapped, “Just let me assess everything first.”

We relented, watching her disappear inside. Nick held the dog's collar and smoothed her white fur gently as she whimpered at Mom's exit, "Shhhh... It's okay, Daisy."

But was it? All three of us couldn't stop staring, overwhelmed by everything to see.

"The steeple's gone," Nick said, pointing out the church in the distance. That church was a Baptist church we passed every time we went to Nick's baseball games. It always seemed so far from our house when we drove to the games, but all this time, it was only a valley away.

"I just can't believe it," I shook with nerves. I hate to say I smiled as I stared, struck with wonder despite the horror. I didn't know how else to process the emotions. What good would it do to cry? We were alive. We had survived.

Nick was similar, caught up in the scale of the disaster, and Hannah looked on silently from the back seat, worry written on her face but mingled with awe as well.

Every inch of grass seemed to contain some level of debris. So much so that you wouldn't be able to take a step without the possibility of a nail going through your shoe. Branches and limbs were everywhere, and the number of trees in the bottom driveway seemed beyond impossible to even consider moving. Surely, someone would take care of that, right?

Mom came back out, clearly distressed. I could tell she'd probably cried, "Is everything okay?" I asked.

"It's a mess," she sighed, "But it could be worse." She glanced at the tornado path and frowned.

“Can we go look?”

“Yes, the inspection guy got here not long before we did. The house is stable but be careful! There is glass everywhere.”

We jumped out of the car and into the crisp morning air. Dad was already in his grass-cutting hat with a pair of thick gloves on, picking up debris. We hurried through the wood and shingles and into our house.

Leaves and glass covered the floor of the foyer. We stepped around the debris till we stood in the living room’s door facing. Our mom stopped us, “Don’t go in.” There wasn’t much of a desire to, though. The blinds had blown out onto the couch under the window, and pieces of wood lay scattered around the room. The wind from outside made the blinds sway slightly, nature now able to move about our house as freely as it wished, “All the windows on that side of the house are blown in. And,” She guided us to the dining room to a window closest to the door, “This window is blown out.”

We all gazed in awe as we studied the still in-tack window that budged outwards, forced out of place as the wind looked for an exit point. Surprisingly, it was the only window on the front side of the house.

“Imagine what it would have been like if we’d stayed,” I mumbled, trying to imagine us all huddled in the dining room corner as the wind tore through the house. Us all holding onto each other and screaming.

“We would have been pretty traumatized, that’s what.” Mom said, then sighed and moved on.

I walked over to the laundry room, and there in the door facing was my new shirt. I didn't touch it, but it looked fine. However, going to dance seemed like a distant hope at this point—a thought, but a distant one that caused a little pit in my stomach.

I leaned in as far as I could into the office area.

“Were our schoolbooks ruined?” I asked as innocently as I could.

“They’ve got some glass on them, but I think they’re fine.”

Of course, I sighed, just my luck. A tornado hits my house and the schoolbooks survive.

I made a beeline for my room but didn't walk in at first, afraid of tracking glass and debris into the room. To my left, leaves and glass-covered my parent's bedroom, just like the living room, but the room I shared with Hannah and Nick's room remained intact. I closely inspected the ground to see if there were any signs of glass or leaves. Nothing different. Just like I left it, a disaster area of a different sort.

But it was brighter. Light filtered in through the window over my bed like a spotlight. Even in winter, sunlight had never filled the room that much. I decided to slip off my shoes and slowly make my way into the room, still a little afraid some glass might have made its way onto the floor. I gingerly climbed into the bed and looked out the window.

In the noon sun, I could see everything. The view that ended a few yards from my window extended for almost a mile, but I could see into the valley more from my bedroom window, roads buried under trees, houses with nothing left but bricks, drywall, and foundation. It was just one jumble of destruction. I should have been overwhelmed. I should have felt something other than wonder that day.

But I just felt awe. And felt like I'd missed it.

I remember a buzz distinctly in the back of my mind that kept me from processing the reality of what I was seeing or hearing, a piece of my brain that refused to acknowledge the horror of the events that occurred the night before. It refused to feel fear, but instead, I felt like I missed it. Once again, something amazing happened right out of my reach. I wanted to know how it felt to be that close to death and live. I wanted to feel the wind rush through the house and be on the edge of death. Just like Fidello from my story, as he ran away from the evil elves that threatened to kill him after he discovered the elves were trying to take over his kingdom.

Dad's sheriff friend, Mr. David, stopped by not long after we'd gotten there. We all gathered around the doorframe as he stood on our porch. I'd met him a few times at Nick's ballgames, and he'd helped Dad coach a few times. He and Dad always joked around, and I liked to listen to them banter and talk baseball. But as he stood on the steps, his smile was forced, and his eyes distant.

"I'd been on my way home from work. I got here and immediately started helping the best I could. Everywhere you went, there were people screaming. It was horrible. There was a kid," he paused, "Going into shock. I tried to keep him awake until the paramedics could get to him. I thought for a minute he wasn't going to make it."

Now, it felt real. I couldn't get the way Mr. David looked down at his black shoes from behind my dad. Maybe... I was glad I wasn't there. Perhaps, I would have been scared from hearing the screams and the wind whistling past my house. There would have been a roar so loud it would have been defining. The windows busting. The trees falling all around us, like bombs, one by one. I would have had to hear the precious pecan

fall on the house, ruining every good memory with that crushing sound. As a kid, I used to watch the tree from the window and think, This time, it's going to fall on us. I'd hold my breath waiting for the impact as the wind shook its limbs, thinking this time I would die. Imagine if I had seen it happen? I'd have stared at each tree around my house with such intensity during a storm, that I'd probably never be able to enjoy a storm again. Instead, I was spared, protected.

But curiosity, still itched.

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Stories of my neighbors told by Dad:

- Neighbors across the street:
 - “They said they were standing outside the cellar door, you know that one on the side under the awning when they saw it. Over the tops of the trees. Said it was huge. They closed the door and the [adult] son had to hold it shut. His mom held onto him from behind to help him from being pulled out with the door. He didn't think he was going to be able to hold on.”
- John - neighbor next door to us (away from the tornado path):
 - “He was standing outside their garage as well and Mr. C and his wife had come over to hide in their basement, you know they're very nice. Hadn't met them before till then. Anyway, they were standing outside; trying to see if they could see it. When they saw it and ran inside realizing it was coming for them. Said they were terrified.”
- Ms. Anne – the neighbor who build the new house at the end of the street, arguably the closest to the path.

- “She said she could hear people screaming in the valley.”

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My siblings and I have never been great at cleaning. We used to spend entire afternoons coming up with games that made cleaning harder than if we'd just picked up the toys.

“Okay you go into the other room; I'll pick up one item then you have to guess what I picked up,” I'd say. I picked up the smallest item, put it up, then watched as Hannah and Nick looked over the pile in wonder, trying to locate the missing item.

As you can imagine, that didn't work very well.

Then if we didn't play a game, we usually started playing with whatever we were picking up. Focus was never any of our strengths, and we found cleaning boring. If we were going to clean, we were at least going to have fun doing it. Plus, when your mom was in chronic pain and your dad worked all day, there wasn't a lot of energy to spare to make us clean up our rooms.

Picking up debris proved no different than picking up our rooms. Within minutes, we'd made a game out of it. After we'd looked around the house, we'd slipped on gloves and started to pick away at the debris. My siblings and I did our best to make it a game of who could find the coolest piece of debris, just like the games we'd done when we were younger. Most of it was unimpressive, pieces of water-soaked paper, glittering black shingles, pink insulation, pieces of wood with nails still stuck in them, and broken branches with green leaves still shining in the spring light. We picked our way through the grass, careful of nails. It was like checking for dog poop when playing in the yard as a

kid, except the danger was a nail in the foot coupled with a hospital visit instead of just hosing down your shoe.

Hannah found a piece of wood stuck in the ground a good five inches, a piece of wood with a lightbulb and wires still attached, and a piece of a sign that was two-thirds her size. I snapped a picture of each with my iPod, a little jealous Hannah was finding such cool things. She always found the cool things.

Not too long after that, however, I found a large piece of wood half the size of me. It was finished, like furniture. Smooth and stained.

“It’s so heavy!” I said as I brought it up to the patio, where Mom was taking pictures, for insurance purposes.

“Looks like a piece of a dining room table.” She told me to pose and shot a picture, a picture that I engrained into my memory. My shoulders tensed from the weight, and I looked like I was on the verge of dropping it. The clothes were still the same from the night before, my hair was dirty, and the bra still cut into my ribs. Despite all this and the fact I was holding a piece of someone else’s dining room table, I smiled big.

As I carried it to the pile, I stared at it. A thought, that this piece was a part of another person’s life, and that person might or might not be alive, bubbled in my mind. I pushed it away immediately, instead of focusing on how the wind had carried such a large piece of wood in the air.

Nick called us over to another part of the patio where they found a Subway visor. It was still wet and covered in mud.

“Do you think it also came from Tuscaloosa?” Nick asked, “The tornado didn’t touch the Subway down the road, right?”

“Maybe it came from the one in Hueytown,” I added.

“Maybe,” Mom sighed from behind us, “But it probably came from someone’s house.”

Silence fell between Nick, Hannah, and me. Once again, the opportunity to process that we sat on the edge of a disaster came and all of us let it pass. Nick put down the hat, with a certain degree of reverence, and returned to our scavenger hunt, pretending the disaster didn’t bother us.

A church group had brought us lunch, Subway ironically. They were from one of our neighbor’s churches, “Y’all take what you need! Tonight, there will be food at the First Baptist Church. There will be a sign up though so get there by 4:30 p.m. to be sure you get a spot.” Those people were a blessing, and we ate the turkey sandwiches quickly before going right back out to clean up as much as we could before the sun went down. It’s not like we could have done anything else. No electricity meant no internet.

We piled into the house after hours of lugging debris into a huge pile in our front yard as the sky faded into evening. I tried not to think about the countless little pieces that remained in the yard, as the absolute chaos eroded at the edges of my psyche, attempting to make me process the disaster around my house.

And a lack of electricity, the presence of looters, and open windows had all of us sitting around wondering once again would we stay or would we go back to my grandparents.

“I’m staying here tonight,” Dad said with an air of finality that made my heart sink a bit. We’d just finished up a less than appetizing dinner from the Baptist church, but it was food, “I’m not risking looters getting in here.”

“Are we going back to Grammy’s?” I asked.

“That’s up to your mom.” Dad said. All our eyes turned to her.

I sat on the edge of my seat. As much as I didn’t want to go back to my grandparents, something about staying at our house was much worse. There was still a tree on the house, though the inspector that had come out to the house earlier that afternoon and said it was structurally stable. It made me uncomfortable thinking about it. You could see the branches of the pecan on the house out my window where there use to be the rustling leaves of the oak tree. What if the house gives out? Will I be forced to do school if we stay? I didn’t want to do school even if that was almost the only thing left to do at this point.

Mom stood silent and cross-armed for a while before saying, “I guess we’ll just stay here.”

In hindsight, I wouldn’t have wanted to leave my husband during a disaster nor been alone with two teenage girls and a preteen boy in that haunted house. Sounds like a setup for a bad horror movie. However, at the time, I was annoyed. I didn’t want to stay. I had to be careful where I stepped if we stayed, and the thought of glass being everywhere was making my skin crawl.

The sound of chainsaws, still buzzing away, consumed the dining room. A question that had been bothering me since the night before represented itself. I almost didn’t dare bring it up. It could lead to further annoying my parents and stressing them out more. But I had to know.

So, with a deep breath, I asked.

“Would we be able to go to dance class tomorrow?” I could almost feel Hannah tense at the question, afraid of the same thing that I was afraid of, the hard rejection. My parents sighed almost in unison. I could see them exchange looks as if they knew I’d ask. But that wasn’t a direct no, “It’s the last class. If I don’t go, it’s going to be a whole month before I see any of them again.”

“I don’t know, Elizabeth.” Mom sighed, clearly annoyed with my question. I could read into the annoyance. Elizabeth, how dare you ask this of us? Our house is literally in a disaster zone, and you’re worried about dance?

But before I could counter-argue, Dad pipped up, “I’ll take you. I gotta go to Sam’s anyway and get some things. I’ll drop y’all off then go and come pick y’all up.”

I beamed, “Thank you!” I felt Hannah relax beside me, and Nick even hyped up at the idea that he could also go, his speech therapy being canceled so that Mom could deal with everything happening the next day.

Slowly, the sun began to disappear, and the chainsaws stopped, replaced by the buzz of generators, both noises we would become all too familiar with over the next few months. My parents cleaned out their bathroom so we could take a shower and laid out towels on the floor in case any glass was leftover or was tracked in by our shoes. I remember walking in the first time, there was a hole in the ceiling where a branch stuck through from the pecan tree. That worried me, and I checked with Mom twice that it was okay that I went in.

The shower was such a blessing though. I stepped into the steaming, warm water washing away the grime of the past two days, a baptism of soap and hot water. The last bits of sunlight trickled into the dark shower, lighting up the steam. I didn’t want to leave.

But I did. I felt as if the grime was back as soon as I was out.

As I lay in bed that night, bright moonshine filled by the bedroom, keeping me up. I missed the oak tree with all its vines and the countless pines that once filled the empty space between me and the moon. The pecan tree that raised me, under whose protection I spent countless evenings catching lightning bugs and enjoying the hum of the crickets now laid right above me. I could still see its branches outside my window, its poor beautiful branches. My favorite time of year was when those branches would grow so heavy with leaves that they'd bend down and almost touch a part of the yard. I'd walk through it as if I was Pocahontas going to see Grandmother Willow. My Narnia had been wiped out, my spaceship gone, my Hogwarts destroyed, and my Shire demolished. All my childhood was destroyed in seconds. Frodo's line at the end of The Return of the King movie captured the pain I felt that night:

“When in your heart, you begin to understand. There is no real going back.”