



Friendship set
on fire

M DENFIELD

Friendship Set on Fire

By

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“Love is friendship set on fire.”

-Jeremy Taylor

**A BleakHouse Publishing Chapbook
2013**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Interlude: Julene in Waiting

1. Chapter One: Danielle and Amanda
2. Chapter Two: Julene
3. Chapter Three: Court
4. Chapter Four: Frank and Mrs. Fuller

Interlude: Julene the Shameless

5. Chapter Five: Court and Elaine
6. Chapter Six: Amanda
7. Chapter Seven: Frank
8. Chapter Nine: Alma
9. Chapter Eight: Court

Interlude: Julene in Defeat

10. Chapter Ten: Toni
11. Chapter Eleven: Danielle

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Julene Wilson: Adopted daughter of Spencer and Alma

Alma Wilson: Julene's mother, recently released from prison after serving ten years of her sentence for the murder of her husband

Spencer Wilson: Julene's father, Toni's brother, deceased

(Court)ney Carey: Julene's cousin, son of Toni and Robert

Toni Carey: Spencer's sister, widow of Robert, mother of Court

Robert Carey: Toni's husband, Court's father, deceased

Danielle Smith: Mother of Amanda, never been married

Amanda Smith: Danielle's only child

Mrs. Fuller: Widowed mother of Dave

Frank Fuller: Alma's good friend, unmarried, son of Mrs. Fuller

Elaine Roberts: Guidance counselor at the high school

INTERLUDE: JULENE IN WAITING

Julene rolled onto her stomach, resting her face against the sun-warmed blanket. She had carefully placed her tennis shoes at the edge of the basketball court and her toes rejoiced to be out of their confinement. Amanda poked her and she batted her hand away, lazy.

“You’re keeping secrets from me again,” Amanda observed.

Julene yawned. “What secrets could I possibly have today?”

“You’ve been miserable about something all day. You know perfectly well that as I am your best-“

“And only-“

“And only friend, I insist upon being miserable when you are.”

“You and your demands.”

“Seriously, Jules.”

Julene finally rolled over and looked at Amanda, squinting against the fading sun. She flicked back a strand of her long black hair. “I got a letter from my mom yesterday.”

“And?”

“And they’re finally letting her out of jail, after nine long years of her twenty-five year sentence. Good behavior, apparently. Let the rejoicing commence.” Julene turned her face back against the blanket.

Amanda was silent for a while. When she wanted to, she could be silent for days. It was one of the things Julene appreciated most about her.

“Is she going to come back here?”

“Apparently.” Julene’s voice was muffled. “She still owns the house, you know, although it’s been rented all these years, and I guess she thinks she’ll be welcomed back with open arms.”

“Does your aunt know yet? Or Court?” Amanda stretched out alongside Julene, not touching.

“Court, no. God knows about her. I’m certainly not going to tell her. But she hasn’t gone out and bought a gun yet, so I’m guessing not.”

Amanda rolled closer and slung her arm over Julene’s shoulders, and Julene let it rest there for a minute before shrugging it off. She didn’t say anything else.

CHAPTER ONE: DANIELLE AND AMANDA

Danielle hummed dreamily as she watered her pots on the patio. They were perfectly arranged so that the plumeria's red blossoms contrasted with the yellow of the tulips. Danielle had always wanted a real garden with a yard and room for flowers, but as her fiftieth birthday was long behind her, she had mostly given up hope on that. Yes, her tiny bungalow rested on a gravelly lot near a major intersection, with a road of cracked pavement faded to grey-white her only view, but she had painted it and repaired it and made it home.

Finishing with the flowers, she held her earthy hands away from her body so they wouldn't mark her long skirt. She looked out the kitchen window as she scrubbed her hands with her favorite lemon soap and saw her daughter walking up the path. Danielle sometimes looked at Amanda with half-bemusement, wondering how such a beautiful, elegant person could have come from her ordinary, plump body. But Amanda wasn't bouncing on her heels the way she usually did; her steps dragged and her shoulders were slumped as she trudged up the stairs.

Danielle met her at the door, and Amanda collapsed into her hug. Danielle didn't say anything for a minute, until Amanda's breathing had evened out a little. "Want to tell me about it?"

"Later, maybe," Amanda said. "I really want to be alone now." She squirmed away from Danielle's hold.

"Okay." Danielle ruffled her daughter's short hair. "Dinner in about twenty minutes." She tried not to worry as she watched Amanda trudge upstairs, her rolling backpack covered in fading stickers bumping up the steps behind her. Amanda was usually pretty happy-go-lucky, especially compared to Julene, and Danielle was suddenly angry at whatever had hurt her little girl. Amanda had enough on her plate without more trouble.

Danielle liked to cook, and Amanda didn't, so by mutual agreement Danielle did all the cooking and Amanda did the dishes. Danielle had always found the act of preparing food very restful, but she wasn't able to really concentrate in the face of Amanda's unhappiness – and by extension, Julene's.

On an impulse, she went to the phone on the wall and dialed a number, before she could talk herself out of it.

“7-11, this is Court, how can I help you?”

Danielle's heart fluttered at the sound of his voice.
“Court, it's Danielle Smith. Am I interrupting anything?”

“Nope,” he assured her. His voice sounded a little deeper than the last time she spoke to him, growing out of its awkward adolescence. “Haven't seen anyone all day. I have caught up on my summer reading, though. What can I do for you?”

Danielle walked over to the window and surveyed her lawn blankly. “Have you seen Julene today?”

“She split early this morning, before I could talk to her. Why?”

“Amanda just came home, and it's obvious that Julene was upset about something.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Well, I'll keep an eye on her tonight, and beat it out of her if necessary. But don't worry, I'm sure it's nothing big. Toni said she could only sleep over with Amanda one night this week – maybe that's it.”

Danielle laughed, and felt her heart lift a little. She thanked him, hung up, and went back to her dinner, which could

no longer hold her concentration. It always hurt, when she talked to Court. She could have avoided it, she supposed – their town wasn't that small. But there were days when she felt like she would die if she didn't see his face, hear his laughter. He wasn't her child – and that could still cut like a knife – but he was Robert's, and every year she could see more of Robert in him. His kindness and compassion, his dry humor and sense of the ridiculous. Amanda, at least in terms of personality, had turned out more like her. But seeing Court was almost enough to dispel the relentless, helpless longing she felt for Robert, every moment of the day and night. Time hadn't dulled her grief, only sharpened it; every year was another year when he didn't see Amanda grow so beautiful, Court excel in school, the leaves change in the autumn. She dreamed of his hands touching her; she woke up drenched in sweat, gasping for him. She had never been beautiful, even when she was young, but he had made her feel beautiful every moment of the day. In exchange, she had forgiven him everything – every missed date, every cancelled dinner, having to see his wife in the supermarket wearing his ring. She forgave him everything except for his death. She had fought for ten years to have all of him, only to end up with nothing, not even the privilege of weeping over his grave. There were some things that weren't forgivable.

Dinner would have been uncomfortably quiet if Danielle and Amanda hadn't understood each other so well. Danielle knew perfectly well that Amanda wouldn't say anything until she was completely ready. So when Amanda put down her fork and looked up expectantly, Danielle gave her her attention.

"I'm going to talk to Henner about starting the LGTB support group," Amanda said firmly. "I've thought about it, and I think I'm ready. I'll be in college in two years anyway, so if it all goes terribly I'll at least have a way out. And I can put it on my college applications."

Danielle smiled at her. "Honey, you know how proud I am of you. You have more bravery in your little finger than most kids do in their whole bodies at this age. But are you sure this is

what you want to do? There's no coming back from this if you change your mind."

"It is the *Gay-Straight* alliance," Amanda said indignantly. "I can totally fake liking the boyparts if I want to. And I already have short hair and wear boy clothes most of the time anyway. I doubt anyone will be too surprised."

"I think you underestimate people's abilities not to see what they don't want to see," Danielle said gently. "And I worry that you're not making this decision for yourself, but for – someone else."

Danielle wasn't embarrassed herself, but Amanda blushed furiously. "I'm not some abused wife, Mom, and I can actually make decisions on my own. And everyone important already knows everything about me already."

"What *does* Julene think of this?" Danielle asked, dropping the pretense of who they were talking about.

Amanda sighed deeply. She brought up her hands and rested her head in them, pushing her uneaten dinner away. "That's the other thing I have to talk to you about."

A humid rain had started falling outside, and Danielle could hear the soft drumming on her tin roof. She moved her chair closer to Amanda's, and took her hand, and listened.

CHAPTER TWO: JULENE

Julene drove home slowly, after dropping Amanda off. She had to be back on time for dinner every night, but she liked to time it so that she came in right on the dot of seven. On an impulse, she pulled the car over and parked crookedly in front of the 7-11, ignoring the horn of the driver behind her. Her thighs were sweaty against the hot leather of the car seat, and they made a gross sound as she got out. Court looked up as the bell jingled when she came in, then gave her a little smile.

“You’ve got grass in your hair,” he said, motioning towards his own head. “Here, let me.”

Julene stood still so he could pick the wisps out of her long hair. He was tall enough that she didn’t even have to bend her knees so he could reach.

“There,” he said, stepping back and brushing off his hands. “That’s as good as it’s going to get, at least.” He grinned at her.

“We can’t all be a pretty pretty princess, Courtney,” she said, drawing out his name to annoy him, and jumping up on the counter.

“You’re just jealous because the ladies love this.” He flexed his skinny arms, then pretended to kiss his biceps. “They want a strong, muscled man warming their beds at night.”

“Then they’ll be awfully disappointed with a zitty teenager.”

“Fuck you,” he groaned. “I thought we were pretending not to notice that.”

“Who is this we, kemosabe?” But because he was

pouting, she reached out and ruffled his blond hair. “I swear I can barely see it.”

“Yeah, right. Other people get their huge zits in normal places, at least. I get one on the tip of my freaking nose. How is this fair?”

“See life, and the unfairness thereof. You ready to go?”

He glanced at his watch. “Yep. Gotta lock up.” He looked down at her. “Do you think it’s okay tonight?”

She shrugged. “I’m not any good at predicting it. It was fine this morning, at least, and she let me take the car out. Maybe today is a ‘we’re a happy family day.’”

“They’re awful, but they’re better than the others,” Court said seriously.

“Well, the sooner we go back, the sooner we’ll find out.” Julene swiped a candy bar on the way out in case she wasn’t going to get dinner.

When they got home, she let Court go in the door before her. Toni swooped in from the kitchen and kissed Court on the cheek.

“It’s nearly seven, and- good heavens, Julene, you’re filthy!” Toni stepped closer to brush at her shirt, and Julene gritted her teeth and let her. Toni seemed to be in a good mood, and Julene felt herself relax a little. “What have you been doing today? Go upstairs and clean up, and hurry, it’s nearly seven and the table hasn’t been set yet.”

“I’ll do it, Mom,” Court said, leaning on the door, tall and lanky.

Toni pursed her lips. “Fine, if you want to. But Julene, you know the deal was that you’d help more around the house if you didn’t get a summer job. And I mean a job that pays, Julene, I don’t want to hear about your library again.”

“Yes, Aunt Toni,” Julene intoned, heading up the stairs. She closed the door to her small room and, after a moment’s pause, opened her underwear drawer and shoved the letter inside, for lack of a better place. She had some vodka left in the bottle under her bed, and she took a moment to imagine drinking it, feeling the alcohol scorch her esophagus and travel, warm, down her throat and into her stomach until she was loose and giddy. Then she brushed off her clothes and went downstairs to set the table.

Toni’s house had been decorated at great expense in the 1970s, and not updated since. Court, Julene and Toni ate on stools at the orange formica tabletop, facing the yellowed appliances and plaid wallpaper. On the side table rested a picture of Uncle Robert, squinting into the sun and smiling. He really was the very image of Court, and Julene could understand why Toni had fallen for him. What she could never work out was why on earth he had married her.

“Eat your peas, Julene,” Toni said sweetly. She had said the same thing every Tuesday dinner for the past ten years, and Julene had gritted her teeth and forced them down every Tuesday for the past ten years. She’ll probably go on saying it long after I’m gone, Julene thought. ‘Eat your peas, brush your hair, don’t slouch’ to the cats and the tablecloth and the picture of Uncle Robert. At least he had escaped her, even if it took death to do it. She barely remembered his death, only a scant few months after he mother went to prison.

“You know,” Court said solemnly, “I heard on the radio today that scientists have linked peas to global warming, childhood obesity, and west Elm disease. It’s probably better for

Julene to be on the safe side and not touch them.”

Toni shook her head, offering a rare smile. “When I was your age, my mother made me eat every bit of everything on my plate, and it wasn’t the lovely fresh vegetables you have now. It was canned everything, and it all tasted the same. It’s too bad your grandparents died so early – they would have loved the produce you can get today. You should be grateful for it.”

“We are, Mom.” Court scooped up the last bit of his meatloaf. “We’re just more grateful for the peaches and strawberries than the peas and carrots.”

Julene hadn’t seen Toni in this good of a mood in a long time, and she decided that this was as good a time as any. “Aunt Toni?”

Toni looked at her warily. “Yes, Julene?”

“I’ve grown out of my tennis shoes again.” She swallowed, her dry throat making a clicking sound. She could feel her heart speed up. “My toes are all scrunched up at the end.”

Toni didn’t answer for a minute, and Julene felt beads of sweat rise up on her skin, despite the coolness of the air-conditioned kitchen.

“There are some really cheap ones at TJ Maxx-” Julene knew as soon as she started speaking that she had made a big mistake, and she snapped her mouth shut.

“As I recall, I bought you shoes just a little while ago, Julene. And you assured me that you really liked these ones and they would last a long time.”

“Yes, but I’ve grown-”

“Julene, you can’t have grown in just a few weeks. I’m afraid you’re making up stories again, just as you’ve always done, and you know I’m not very fond of that.” Toni’s voice had entered a sweet sing-song pitch. Julene’s hands were trembling, so she shoved them under her thighs on the chair.

“Mom,” Court interjected. “It was at least six months ago, because we got them when we bought my basketball uniform, remember?” He was tense in his chair, as if he was ready to leap up.

Toni studied them for a second, and Julene held her breath. The whole world seemed to stand still, until Toni said, “Goodness, it was a long time ago then, wasn’t it? How the time flies. All right, we’ll go tomorrow, Julene.”

Toni picked up her fork and started eating again, and Julene felt her shoulders drop. She flicked a glance at Court, thanking him without words, and he gave her a little half-smile with no amusement in it whatsoever.

After she cleaned up after dinner, Julene was allowed to go upstairs and do her homework. She was doggedly working her way through a problem set for physics when she heard the phone ring downstairs. She sat up and leaned towards the door in case it was Amanda calling, but it sounded like it was for Toni. She went back to her homework and instantly forgot about the call until Toni appeared at her door.

“Julene, dear,” she said, and Julene snapped to attention.

“Yes?” she tried.

“I’ve just gotten a phone call from your mother’s warden. It seems your mother’s parole board has decided to release her; isn’t that exciting?” As usual, her face was expressionless.

Julene's heart stopped. "Really?" she exclaimed, wincing at her volume in the quiet room. In a softer tone, she said, "I knew it was a possibility, but I'm still surprised that it happened so soon."

"So soon," Alma repeated, and Julene winced. The ticking of the clock in the hall was suddenly very loud. There was a little scratch on the wood surface of her desk, and Julene focused on it until her vision began to blur. She felt dizzy and nauseated.

"That's an interesting choice of words, Julene, and I have to agree – it is soon. Very soon, in fact- only seven years, correct? Of course, you probably don't remember the date your mother shot my brother –"

"October 1," Julene spat.

"Well, I'm pleased that you have some remembrance for my brother. It's so interesting, isn't? He was only thirty-three, and we are a long-lived family – he might easily have lived another sixty years. So that's sixty years your mother took from me, in exchange for – What? Seven and a half years."

She grabbed Julene's shoulders and pulled her close enough that their noses nearly touched. "Seven years," she repeated. Her hot breath on Julene's face repulsed her, and she shoved her away, hard. Toni stumbled and smacked into the wall.

"Do you know what *I* think is interesting, Aunt Toni? Do you? I think it's interesting that you still count the days since my father died." Julene's heart was racing out of control. "I think it's interesting that you were clearly more upset when he died than you were when your own husband had a heart attack! And you know what else? The whole town thinks it's interesting too! The whole town –"

"Quiet," Toni said, and Julene fell silent. Now that her anger was spent, apprehension rose up in her throat, tightening her chest with terror. She couldn't win against Toni – why had

she started? She wiped her clammy hands on her shorts compulsively. Her right ankle wobbled, and she feared suddenly that she would fall down right in front of Toni.

Toni surveyed her dispassionately. “You are nothing. You are an insignificant, worthless little girl with the filthiest mind I have ever come across. The fact that you could say such disgusting things to me simply proves that there is something terribly wrong in how you were made. You were an unwanted child, and I have only sympathy for whatever poor woman abandoned you in front of that dumpster, because she clearly knew from the start what you were. Now you will wait in the bathroom while I remove some things from your room. You have proven that you are not yet ready for choices, Julene, and until you are, I will have to make the decisions for you.”

Julene waited in the bathroom while Toni emptied her room. She knew from experience that when she came back, her books and phone and clothes would all be gone. She hoped that Toni would let her go over to Amanda’s the next day – at least there she could wear some clean clothes while she waited for Toni to relent and return her other things. This happened fairly often. Luckily, Amanda just seemed to think that Julene really hated doing laundry.

It was hard, living here. Julene had thought about running away many, many times. But in the end, she was too stubbornly practical. At least with Toni, she had a roof over her head and food to eat. She knew that Danielle and Amanda would take her in in an instant, but they lived pretty hand-to-mouth and Julene had a mortal fear of being a burden. At least she didn’t feel any guilt about eating Toni’s food and spending her money. She felt comfortable knowing that Toni disliked her just as much as she despised Toni.

CHAPTER THREE: COURT

Court couldn't think of anyone in the whole town who was as pathetic and cowardly as him.

He was seventeen years old; old enough to stand up for his almost-sister, old enough to stop all the horrible things that went on in his house from happening. He was almost old enough to go to war; in the past he would have been married, fathered a child and been a warrior by now. Except he never would have made a warrior if he couldn't even get the courage to admit to himself that his mother was crazy. She really was. She'd never hit him or Julene – in fact, she'd never treated Court badly at all – but he was done pretending that she was like anybody else's mother.

He barely remembered when Julene's father died and she came to live with them. He was only nine and young for his age, more interested in his own fantasy worlds than his adopted cousin suddenly appearing in his home. He couldn't remember the point at which he started to help Julene cover up for things. His mother didn't leave bruises and she didn't do anything odd where anyone could see. She'd leave Julene locked in the bathroom all night, and then innocently inquire in the morning why Julene hadn't gone to her bed. She wouldn't buy Julene new shoes until she cried with the pain of forcing them on her feet, but then got tearful and asked why Julene hadn't told her she needed new shoes earlier. For a long time, Court believed her. He knew Julene was in the bathroom because he heard her crying through the vent, and he had heard her ask his mother for new shoes, but Toni's word had been enough for him to doubt Julene. Until the day with the fire, when everything changed.

They'd talked about their options countless times. In the movies and TV shows, the kids who were abused always went to social services. But they weren't even sure who or where these

people were in their rural town, and they would probably be people who knew and respected Toni anyway. Plus, every time they decided to finally take action, Toni changed. She had always treated Court nicely, but she would start making Julene's lunch too, helping her fix her hair, buying her racks and racks of clothes. Each time, they would whisper that maybe she was better, that maybe she'd finally gotten used to Julene, that maybe that A on her report card or first place finish in the spelling bee had convinced Toni to change. It was like a sickness, they'd thought, and maybe she was cured.

He hated himself for always being convinced, always hoping that this change would last forever, that they could really be a happy family. He still missed his dad with everything in him, and when his mother was acting okay, being with her and Julene almost made up for him being gone. It took a hideously long time for him to realize that as his father was gone, he was the head of the house, and it was up to him to make sure that things would get better for Julene. Because clearly, his mother wasn't going to do it.

Just as he was about to switch off his lamp for the night, Julene slipped in his room, closing the door softly behind her. "Hey," he complained half-heartedly. "Knock much?"

"Yeah, yeah," she said, coming over to the bed and lying down next to him. "Move over, pokey elbows," and he obediently scooted over, leaving the pillow on her side so she could put her head on it. He turned on his side and heard the click as she turned off the light, then scooted up behind him and draped her arm over his shoulder. She buried her face in the back of his neck and sighed deeply.

This was where they told each other their deepest secrets, from when they were kids. There'd been a time of awkwardness in their teens when they realized how intimate this position was for two people with rampaging hormones who weren't even technically related, but they'd gotten over it pretty fast. Court didn't know about Julene, but this was one of the only times he

got to really be intimate with anyone, and he missed it when it wasn't there.

“So your mom’s getting out,” he whispered, and she breathed, “Yeah,” into his hair.

“When did you hear?”

“Her letter came last week, but I only read it today.” Julene shifted behind him. “It’s weird, you know? I guess I never really thought she would get out.”

“Are you scared?”

“A little, yeah. Nervous. Anxious. All of that.”

“Happy?”

Julene paused. “Is it terrible if I say no?”

“Of course not.” Court reached back and squeezed her hand. “It’s a big change, and you haven’t seen her in a long time. And everything’s – complicated.”

Julene blew out her breath. “Complicated like how she killed my dad.”

“Yeah,” Court said carefully. “Complicated like that.” He felt young and stupid, uncertain of what to say. He wished that life was like TV, and he was given a set of lines to read. Even if they had been the wrong lines, at least he wouldn’t exist in this uncertainty.

“Can I sleep here tonight?”

“Of course,” he responded automatically, reaching over and clicking off the lamp. As he did so, he resolved that Julene shouldn’t have to live with his mother any longer. There was very

little that he could do for her, but he thought he knew someone who could.

CHAPTER FOUR: FRANK AND MRS. FULLER

After her third husband died after choking on a walnut at the age of thirty-six, Mrs. Fuller had decided that she was fated to be a widow living in a small town for the rest of her life. Her only consolation was her son, Frank, although as he had passed his fortieth birthday without being married, Mrs. Fuller despaired of him.

But Mrs. Fuller found some contentment in the world outside her front door. Her house had a perfect view of the high school, the front door of the grocery store, and the bus stop. Mrs. Fuller rarely left her house, but she was always the first to know everything about everyone.

One Friday, she bustled around in the early morning, making her tea and fussily arranging the afghan covering her chair. Today was the day that Alma Carter was coming back to town, and Mrs. Fuller could hardly stand the excitement. She would have to alight at the bus stop, and it was Mrs. Fuller's most fervent wish that she would appear as the high school let out, so she could see the inevitable confrontation with Alma's adopted daughter. She pitied the poor girl, even though she was clearly rude and indifferent to most normal feelings. Perhaps she would slap her mother, or burst into tears. With little excitement in her own life, Mrs. Fuller relished the tragedies in others.

She spotted Court, Toni's nice son, and Danielle's girl talking in front of the school. Amanda was certainly lovely – far prettier than her Asian friend. Adopting children was all well and good – someone had to take in those unwanted babies -- but Mrs. Fuller disapproved of mixed-race homes. Like should marry like, she often said, and that went for adoption as well. But who would ever marry a girl who didn't even know who her father was? Mrs. Fuller considered the possibility of Court and Amanda, and inwardly shuddered. Court was clearly such a nice boy, and he could do much better. Julene's truck pulled up just as the bell

rang, but Court and Amanda waited for her before they went inside.

Mrs. Fuller waited the whole day by the window, hardly daring to dart away to refill her teacup. The school day was long over and dusk had fallen before she spotted Alma among the crowd alighting from the bus. Mrs. Fuller inspected her closely, but to her disappointment, couldn't spot any visible signs of being a murderess. Alma's once-vibrant red hair had faded, and her body looked thicker. But before Mrs. Fuller could get her full look, Julene's truck pulled up and Alma got in the passenger side. At that moment, Mrs. Fuller would have given everything she had to be able to hear what went on in that car.

The next day, her son paid her a visit (and not any too soon, she inwardly thought). She poured him a cup of tea and sat down beside him, eyes fixed on his face. He hardly ever came to see her, she thought querulously, she who had borne and raised him and done her best to give him a stepfather.

"Have you seen her? Alma, I mean?" she inquired, in appropriately hushed tones, as when speaking of the dead.

Frank sighed. "Yes, I stopped by yesterday to welcome her back to the neighborhood."

Mrs. Fuller gasped, putting her hand to her heart. "Welcome her back to the neighborhood? A murderer? I hardly slept a wink last night, I was that afraid. Imagine, having her come back here just as if we didn't all know that she shot her husband only a few years past!"

"It was over ten years ago."

"Well, she always was such a brazen girl, no care about propriety or her manners or *anything*. And adopting that Asian

girl, Julene – so tragic that she couldn't have children of *course*, but I'm sure there were plenty of other lovely little girls waiting to be taken in-

“Lovely little white girls, you mean?” Frank interrupted icily.

“Now Frank, there's no need to take that tone with me, you know I am the last person to hold any prejudices about anyone. Why your father, bless his heart, was part Indian on his grandmother's side, although of course you couldn't tell by looking at him. All I am saying is that families shouldn't be all different colors like a box of crayons! My goodness, how are we ever to know who belongs to who?”

Frank shoved back his chair and stood. “I have to go, Mother.”

“All right, all right.” His mother presented her cheek to be kissed. “But don't let it be so long. I hardly ever see you any more.”

Frank had loved Alma not from the moment they met, or even at their second or third meetings, but on the fourth. He had come upon her kicking the shit out of her car in the 7-11 parking lot. It was a sticky summer night, and her light dress clung to her upper body. She was going about her task very methodically, beginning with the left bumper and moving around the car clockwise, kicking and occasionally scraping at the paint with the heel of her shoe. She glanced up and met his eyes after a few minutes. “Wouldn't start,” she said simply.

She'd invited him to her wedding, but he'd driven to some bar a few towns away and gotten blind drunk, cursing Spencer Wilson who was marrying Alma for her poise and grace

and beautiful face, and not for her temper, her impatience, and her love for terrible Lifetime movies.

He'd wanted to go to every day of the trial, but it hadn't been possible. Julene usually stayed with him whenever she was out of school and Alma and Spencer couldn't be home, so after Alma was arrested he'd preempted Toni's demands and taken Julene home with him.

She'd had screaming nightmares every night for three weeks, and acted scrupulously normal during the daytime. Any deviation in their usual patterns panicked her immediately. They had eaten peanut butter and banana sandwiches for dinner every night for two weeks, and watched *Muppet Treasure Island* every night before bed.

He hadn't wanted to take Julene to the trial, but she'd had to testify. So he brought her in. He led her up the central aisle, his hand in hers, and as his eyes met Alma's, he almost felt as if he was in church, walking up the aisle with Julene on her wedding day. Alma's eyes shone with tears.

He'd argued for custody of Julene, but a single man couldn't compete with Toni and Robert's aggressive public relations campaign. He didn't think Julene had ever forgiven him for not getting her, because her visits had gotten less and less frequent until they had trailed off altogether. Toni had confided in him that she had been a problem all throughout her time growing up: stealing things, acting out, refusing to behave, and then locking herself in the bathroom for hours in a temper tantrum. It all seemed very out of character for Julene, but he supposed he didn't know how she would react to adolescence. He would never like Toni, but he was glad she obviously cared for her brother's child.

As she grew older, he'd watched Julene get closer to Amanda and Court. They were an interesting trio – three fatherless children, with one dead, one basically nonexistent – and Julene. After years of speculation, public gossip over the

identity of Amanda's father had finally died out, with no fuel for the fire. Frank had wondered for years if her father was Spencer. He knew that Alma knew the identity of the father, even if she wouldn't tell him. It had to have been a married man, because why would any single man not want to marry a kind, wonderful woman like Danielle?

But Frank also thought that Spencer would probably have been attracted to a different type – while Danielle was an amazing woman, she was no beauty, and would never compare to someone like Alma. So he gave up the identity of Amanda's father as an unsolvable question – and what did it matter, seventeen years later?

INTERLUDE: JULENE THE SHAMELESS

“Are you going to say anything?” Alma asked wearily, after four blocks of silence.

Julene glanced over. “Hi, Mom,” she said dryly. “What exactly would you like me to say?”

“Well, just about anything would do, but I thought you would be happy! I’m your mother, Julene, and I know I’ve been gone a long time, and missed a lot of your childhood – and that fucking kills me, Julene! It kills me! I have spent the last ten years thinking of nothing but you, and now I’m finally here-“ Alma broke off and was silent for a few minutes. “It’s just hard to see you after all this time,” she finally said.

Julene pulled into the driveway of her childhood home. She had been back a few times in the past ten years, but never for long, and never alone. Frank Fuller had gone with her the few times she had agreed to return. But she wouldn’t ever go into the living room, even though she was told that it was newly recovered and painted. She dreamed sometimes of a blood leak coming from the ceiling of Toni’s living room, dripping until it created puddles, spreading on the floor of Toni’s home and suffusing the entire house with the copper, violent scent, creeping up the walls, drenching the flowered wallpaper so it pulled away in long strips, heavy with the moist weight-

The click of Alma’s seatbelt was very loud in the silence. “I only have this box,” she said awkwardly. “So I’m ready to go in.”

“Okay, go in.”

Alma blinked. “You’re not coming? Do you need to get something from Toni’s? Or-“

“No, I didn’t. I’m just not coming in, Mom.”

“But I thought you might stay here, at least for tonight.”

Julene laughed, once. It was not a pretty sound “Are you kidding me? You honestly think I might be able to sleep in this house? You haven’t been near this place since that night. But I have had to live in this house for ten years.”

She turned in her seat so she could face Alma as she spat out every word. “Ever since I saw Dad that night, I have lived in this house. Every time I cut my finger and there’s blood, I live in this house. Every time my class at school made Father’s Day cards, I have lived in this house. Every time someone in town whispered around me when I came in the room, I have lived in this house. Every time I have a nightmare, I wake up in this fucking house!”

She was screaming now. “*You* got to get out! *You* got to go to prison! But I have lived in this house for ten years now, and *I am tired of it!*”

CHAPTER FIVE: COURT AND ELAINE

Court felt a rush of anticipation and nervousness as he stood outside Ms. Roberts' door. After she didn't look up from whatever she was writing, he knocked on the door, feeling awkward.

Ms. Roberts looked up and smiled instantly. "Court! Come in,! You've missed the last two meetings we were supposed to have. The Creative Writing Club grieves for its finest – and most prolific – writer."

"The Creative Writing Club is you, me, the two librarians, and Anne Ludeman," Court said dryly. He stumbled over his stupid feet before he got to the chair in front of Ms. Roberts's desk, but her smile didn't flicker, like she didn't even notice. He felt a surge of gratitude.

"Well," Ms. Roberts said, lowering her voice and looking towards the door, "As much as I love Anne's poetical musings on spring, summer, nature, rippling rivers, small woodland creatures-

"Fairies, dryads, nymphs, strong female characters in history-

"Repetition does tend to dull the emotional impact," she finished with a sly smile, and he laughed.

She made a guilty face. "I shouldn't have said that, so you'd better forget it ever happened. Now, what can I do for you? It's too early for college stuff, but too late to switch classes this semester."

"No, it's nothing to do with that. I just had a question – can we make it a hypothetical?"

She frowned. “I guess so, but there are certain things I would have to take action on, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” Court said, knowing that he would have to choose his words carefully. “Can a woman who was imprisoned for the murder of her husband ever get custody of her daughter?”

It was obvious she knew what he was talking about – no one in this town could avoid knowing – but she kept her expression grave. “It’s certainly possible, especially if the child herself requested it. The judges around here like to see mothers and their children together, even if the mothers were imprisoned. But if the mother was still on parole,” she paused, “then I’m not sure what could be done. Especially if the child was nearly of legal age to make her own decisions, a judge might be reluctant to take guardianship away from someone who had possessed it for a long period of time.”

He leaned back in the chair and thought. Ms. Roberts’ words had reminded him that if he said that Toni was abusing her, someone would instantly take action. But in spite of everything, he was reluctant to do that, for the same reason that he hadn’t done so for the last ten years. He loved his mother, and when she was doing well she was so kind to him and Julene, so supportive, so loving. He didn’t want to begin anything that couldn’t be undone. He remembered how his father had treated his mother – to a ten year old’s eyes, he had been the perfect husband, always caring and conscious not to hurt her. He knew that his father would want him to do what was best for both his mother and Julene, which meant that he couldn’t say anything bad about her.

“Court?” Ms. Roberts said gently, and he remembered where he was.

“Thanks, Ms. Roberts,” he said, rising, and she put her hand on his before he could leave.

“You know that you can always tell me anything you need to, Court,” she said seriously. “I’m your guidance councilor, but I’m only twenty-five! I haven’t forgotten what it’s like to be a high school student.”

“Okay, Ms. Roberts,” he said, and she winked at him.

“It’s 3:05 by my watch, Court. Since it’s after school hours, I think you can call me Elaine.”

“Okay,” he said again, ducking his head and blushing. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then – Elaine.”

He told his mom that he had a lot of homework, and shut himself in his room after dinner. He had to find a way for Julene to live with Alma. He couldn’t tell his mother, he couldn’t tell an authority figure, and he couldn’t get his mother in trouble with anyone. Court didn’t think his mother particularly enjoyed Julene’s presence in their lives, but he knew that she hated Alma enough that she wouldn’t want Alma to be happy, which she would be if Julene came to live with her. It seemed to be an impossible problem. How could he make Toni suddenly refuse to have Julene in her house? He could think of plenty of things that Toni would kick Julene out for, but none of them were things Julene would actually do, and he wasn’t about to encourage her to go get knocked up by some football guy just so she could live with Alma. He needed something Alma would despise, but that wouldn’t ruin Julene’s life, or get her in trouble with the law. But what behavior could Julene possibly do that would be so horrible to Alma’s eyes? And how would he get her to see it?

CHAPTER SIX: AMANDA

Julene had been avoiding her the whole day, and Amanda was sick of it. Amanda had had to learn that Julene's mother was expected on the 8:00 bus from the school grapevine, for chrissake. She finally gave up of trying to catch her in the halls and cut sixth period so she could lurk like a creepy stalker by Julene's car.

Julene sighed heavily when she reached her car and spotted Amanda. "I have a headache, honey," she said, but reached over and popped the lock anyway as she slid into the car. "I have to go straight home, you know. I can't drop you off."

"Why?" Amanda asked, and Julene just shrugged. It was sometimes tough to be best friends with the most uncommunicative person in the whole world. "Going to visit your mom?"

Julene braked to a sharp halt at the yellow light, flinging both of them forward against their seatbelts. "No, Amanda, we've talked about this. At length. Forever."

"No we haven't, you've stalled and stalled and changed the subject. You've been avoiding me, Julene, for weeks now you've been avoiding me!" Amanda slumped back in her seat. "I'm your best friend and it's like pulling teeth to get you to say anything to me."

"I'm sorry, Amanda," Julene said though gritted teeth. "I guess I forgot to bare my deepest feelings about the return of my mother. If you want, I can go home and get my diary so you can read it-"

"You *know* you don't need to tell me everything, but you do have to tell me something! You haven't even told me when you're moving in with her!"

Julene snarled. She was really angry now, and Amanda was suddenly frightened. Her foot went down on the pedal, and Amanda watched the speedometer like her life depended on it. They were on a residential street, speed limit 25 miles an hour, and the needle crept past thirty, past forty, past fifty. There was a stop sign coming up and for a long moment Amanda thought she was going to run it, until she slammed on the brakes. The car's wheels squealed and fought for traction, and for a moment Amanda thought they were going to fishtail or flip, until they rocked to a stop in the middle of the intersection. Amanda slowly uncurled her white fingers from the bar on the door.

“Move in with her?” Julene asked, deceptively calmly, as if they hadn't nearly died in some embarrassingly typical teenage way, as if her pickup wasn't parked in the middle of the intersection.

“Well, yeah,” Amanda said, uncertainly. “I just thought – I know you hate living with Toni, and everyone's saying that she is going to move back in to your old house-“

“You don't know *anything*,” Julene spat. “Get out.”

“What?”

Julene jerked open her car door and slammed it shut. She stalked over to Amanda's side and wrenched open her door. “Get out!” she screamed.

Amanda slowly exited, close to tears, awkwardly swinging her backpack onto her back. “I'm sorry, Julene, I just wanted to talk. You know you can always talk to me.”

Julene didn't respond, just peeled off. She wasn't going towards her house.

Amanda stewed silently for the rest of the evening, and

her mom was smart enough not to try and engage her. She'd had to walk home nearly a mile with her heavy backpack from where Julene had shoved her out early, just for asking a simple freaking question, which she shouldn't have even *had* to ask because she was supposed to be Julene's best friend.

But her anger changed into worry as she watched the hours tick away. It was incredibly frustrating that she couldn't ever hold a grudge for more than a few hours. By 10:15, she couldn't stand it anymore, so she swiped her mom's keys and drove over to Julene's, parking a block away so Toni's bat-ears wouldn't make out anything.

She wishes Julene's bedroom was on the second story, so she could throw pebbles at her window like they always do in movies, but Toni's house is unfortunately a long ranch, so she shoves through the hydrangeas until she can scratch on Julene's window. Julene gets up – she hadn't been asleep – and comes over to the pane, looking at Amanda solemnly. She's wearing a man's XXL white button-down, and her long hair is pulled back and braided down her back.

“Hold on,” she mouths at Amanda through the window, and Amanda pulls herself out of the dew-wet plants and hikes through the overgrown grass to Julene's back porch. Julene apparently isn't going to put on pants, but it's dark and hopefully there won't be anyone at the playground three blocks away to see.

Julene's thighs are very tan against the stark white of the crisp shirt, and Amanda tries not to look. The concrete under their feet still holds some of the heat of the day. It's a beautiful night, very still and dark. There aren't many streetlights in the suburbs, and Amanda feels a little thrill of fear sneak up her spine as something rustles in the darkness. It's only a cat, of course.

Luckily, the idiots who like to come drink at the elementary school playground apparently don't come out on weekday nights, and Julene and Amanda are the only ones there.

Amanda heads automatically to the swing-set, picking the one with the longest chain. She starts pumping her legs, feeling the wind rush by her ears until she gets to the point where she is briefly weightless at the top of the arc, where she's almost worried that the swing will go around the top of the set. She hangs in midair for a moment, but then the chain clunks back and she falls down to earth again.

“You always did like to do that,” Julene said suddenly. “See how high you could go.”

This sounds like the beginning of a conversation, so Amanda lets her weight slow down her swing until she's barely moving. “Little kids are fearless. I used to jump off from the top, but I'm too nervous about getting hurt to do that now. I'd probably break an ankle or something.”

“Yeah,” Julene says listlessly, twirling herself around in slow circles. She hisses in pain as her fingers get stuck in the chain, and Amanda reaches over and frees her. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

It's too dark to really tell, but Amanda thinks that Julene looks over at her. “I'm sorry I was a bitch earlier.”

Amanda shrugs in response. She's still a little shaky from their near-death experience. The depth of Julene's self-destructive capabilities is known to her, but she's never really understood it.

“No, it's not okay. I know it's not.” Julene's voice drops away at the end of the sentence, and Amanda hesitates, wanting to put her arms around her but feeling awkward and unsure about it. She wouldn't have hesitated Before, but now everything she does seems to have double and triple-meanings.

“So what have you been up to?” Julene attempts.

Amanda shrugs again. “College apps, just the usual. Who

are you getting for your recommendations? I want Mrs. Evans and Mr. Scott, but I'm worried that having two English teacher recommendations is too limiting, like I'm not good at anything else."

"What about Mr. Bryar? I thought you liked him."

"I liked Euro history, not really him," Amanda corrected her. "Plus, that was a while ago, and I'm not sure he'd remember me. Are you getting him? He liked you."

"Dunno."

"You haven't decided?" Amanda asked. It's an inane conversation, but at least they're talking again. "Dude, the deadline's coming up, and all the good teachers will be taken if you don't hurry."

"I don't know." In the dim light, Amanda thought she could see Julene bite her lip, her nervous habit. "I'm not really thinking about college anymore."

Amanda stopped dead. "What?" she snapped. "I know you did not just say what I thought you said."

"Lay off," Julene said, sounding bored, her favorite defense mechanism. "I haven't decided anything yet."

"What's to decide?" Amanda half-shrieks. She wants to take Julene in her hands and shake her until she comes to her senses. "Are you really telling me that you want to stay in this shitty town for the rest of your life?"

"I don't have to wait till college," Julene says. "I could leave tomorrow. I could leave *today*. I don't have to stay here."

“What, so you’ll go to New York or Chicago and waitress while you’re sleeping in your car?” Amanda demands. “Does that honestly sound like a great life plan to you?”

“Well, I did consider dressing up in my best sweater and pearls and going off to my reputable state college,” Julene says sarcastically. “I’ll join a sorority, and maybe play on the tennis team! I could find the perfect frat boy to date – although I won’t put out on the first date; I don’t want him to think I’m easy --“

“Why are you being like this?” Amanda asked, tears caught in her throat.

Julene paused. “I just don’t think I can do it anymore,” she whispered. “I can’t be here anymore, I can’t pretend to do this anymore, I can’t fake being happy here anymore—“

And they’re both crying now, and it’s the most natural thing in the world for Amanda to cup Julene’s wet cheek with her hand and kiss her. It only lasts long enough for Amanda to realize that kissing someone while they’re crying isn’t quite as romantic and wonderful as romance novels make it out to be, and then Julene’s jerking herself away.

“What--“ she stutters. “What are you.”

Amanda takes her hand. She wishes that she had a speech of some kind prepared, but she hadn’t exactly expected to end up here tonight.

“Maybe this is what you’re looking for,” she whispers, holding Julene’s trembling hand in her own. “You know how much they would all hate this if they knew, you know how everyone would react. Well *fuck them*, Julene – they can’t stop us from being who we are. We might have to pretend to play by their rules, but we don’t have to in reality.”

Julene stares at her, eyes wide, and Amanda silently prays harder than she can ever imagine praying. “Okay,” Julene finally

says, and it sounds like a promise. “Okay.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: FRANK

Frank pulled into Alma's driveway slowly so the scattered gravel wouldn't scratch his paint. The bouquet he'd picked up in the grocery store looked like it was wilting already, and he tried to straighten a few of the flowers as he walked towards the house.

After he rang the doorbell, he immediately heard footsteps in the hall, and the door was flung open. Frank caught his breath as he saw Alma, her face alight with joy, only to be crushed as her face fell. "Frank," she said flatly. "What are you doing here?"

Frank felt awkward. He'd imagined this moment hundreds of times, but it had never started like this. Feeling awkward made his mumbling worse. "I just came to welcome you home," he said. "With these." He thrust the flowers at her.

"Thank you," Alma said, clearly on autopilot. But her face softened as she inhaled the scent of the flowers. "Come in – I'm glad you're here. I think something's wrong with my phone."

"Have you paid the bill?" Frank asked, and immediately regretted it as Alma shot him a withering look.

"Of course I have. I called the day after I got home and got it all set up and paid a huge fee to have it reconnected. But I've been calling Julene all day and no one's answered, and I know she must have been home at least some of that time. Elaine at the school told me she didn't have any after school activities or anything."

"Toni has caller ID, you know," Frank said neutrally.

"She does? I'm not surprised, she always did waste her money on the most unnecessary things. Well, I wouldn't be

surprised if she's screening my calls then." Alma frowned.

"Maybe I should drive over there. I could make sure Julene was getting my calls. It would be just like that bitch to make her think I wasn't calling."

Frank didn't know what to say. This was a side of Alma he hadn't remembered, and it was painful to see her labor under her delusion. But it would be too cruel to tell her the truth. "I could call her," he offered. "Let her know that you're trying to reach her."

"Frank, that's sweet, but I think I can talk to my daughter myself," Alma said impatiently. "I'll go over there tomorrow. We can go get ice cream or something – I bet her favorite flavor is still chocolate chip cookie dough."

Julene had preferred pistachio with walnut chips for years. "Maybe," Frank said lamely. He could think of a number of things Julene was likely to do if Alma tried to take her out for ice cream, and none of them were positive. He tried to get the conversation back on track. "Do you want to go out tonight? There's a bunch of new restaurants downtown we could try."

"Maybe," Alma said wearily. "Although I'm not looking forward to all the whispering and staring. It's like no one in this town's ever seen a convicted murderer before."

"Well, we wouldn't have to go downtown," Frank floundered. "We could go to my place and I could cook. I could make us some dinner. I have a really nice place now – I think you'd like it."

"Oh, that's okay," Alma said. "I don't want you to go to any trouble."

Clearly she wasn't getting his point. Frank stepped forward and boldly took her hand in his. She stared at him blankly. "I don't mind taking the trouble for you, Alma. I've been waiting a long time for you to come home." Frank didn't have much experience with kissing, so he decided to close his eyes and go for it. He grabbed the back of Alma's head, accidentally pulling her hair a little, and bent her head down so he could kiss her. Her mouth was open a little, her body stiff and frozen, so he shoved his tongue in her mouth. That got a reaction, although not the one he'd wanted – she gagged and shoved at his arms so violently that he crashed into the delicate hall table and knocked a vase to the floor.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. There was a flush high on her cheeks and the neckline of her silk shirt was pulled slightly to one side.

"Kissing you," he said, beginning to feel humiliated and angry. "I've waited more than ten years – are you really going to make me wait any longer?"

"Wait? Frank, what the hell are you talking about? What do you mean, waiting for me? You're my *friend*."

"Yeah," Frank said furiously. "I've always been your *friend*. I practically raised your kid, I've defended you to everyone in this town who ever said anything bad about you, I fucking held you in my arms when your husband was being an ass—"

"So you think that means you automatically *deserve* something from me —"

"And let's face it, Alma, all you do is take from me. You probably always knew that I had a crush on you; how else would you get away with all the shit you put me through—"

"Shut up!" Alma screamed, but Frank continued.

"And now that you're finally single and out of prison, I

thought you would *finally* be ready to really do something real with me, something that might threaten your cold-bitch heart, and you're just going to blow me off? What, do you think there are tons of guys around here who want to hook up with the inmate of the year? Let's face it, I am the best offer you're ever going to get, and I think it's time you paid me back for everything you've put me through."

"I think you should leave now," Alma said, her voice shaking."

Frank stood his ground, his eyes locked on hers. He sensed the balance of power shifting towards him. Her eyes flickered towards the door, and he shifted his stance so that he was blocking her exit. She was wearing silly little kitten heels and there weren't any other doors in the house.

The sound of the doorbell was such a shock that Alma let out a little shriek. She glanced at Frank, like she was asking for permission, then went to the door on legs that shook and opened it. Elaine, the school counselor, was standing there.

"Hi, Alma!" she said cheerily, then paused when she caught sight of Frank. "Oh, is this a bad time?"

"No, it's fine," Alma said immediately, opening the door and ushering in Elaine. "Frank was just leaving."

Elaine was smiling at him, oblivious to the situation, and Frank couldn't think of any excuse to stay. He roared out of the driveway, spraying the street with gravel from Alma's driveway, feeling furious and impotent. He'd waited twenty years for *this*?

CHAPTER EIGHT: ALMA

Alma thought her first night in prison would be the worst. She had already been through three months in jail, waiting for her sentencing, so she was used to some of the more terrifying aspects – the strip searches, the lack of privacy, the eternal chatter of women, the terrible food and harsh fluorescent lighting illuminating every corner of her new life.

But she hadn't been prepared for the women pretending to be boys. At first they made her laugh, because they reminded her of the middle-school kids she used to teach with their baggy clothes and gelled-up hair and AXE body spray. She'd never had a problem with homosexuals in theory, although of course she'd also never met any before.

But after awhile she was thoroughly sick of the boys. She was disgusted by the boos, who discarded everything they had been outside of prison in order to concentrate on their own lust. All of them were so obsessed with the dark moistness between their legs, like that was their only identity, like their insatiable lust was the only reason they were alive. Alma, product of a sexless marriage, was disgusted by the whole thing.

Luckily, her cellmate Catalina agreed with her about the prison relationships. Catalina, in for the second time for assault with a deadly weapon, was a young, petite Latina woman who had just come out of isolation for attacking another inmate. Alma was initially terrified of her, but after awhile she relaxed. Catalina was pleasant, funny, and absolutely merciless. Alma never, ever folded her towel lengthwise, left garbage in their shared trash can for more than an hour, or played her TV after 8 PM, and they got along fine.

Catalina had long black hair that she struggled to maintain in prison, so after a while, Alma began to take over brushing and maintaining it.

It reminded her of combing Julene's hair, although Julene was now twelve and pictures showed that Toni had cut her hair into a short bob. But Julene had always struggled and pulled away, and Catalina just shut her eyes and leaned back, face smoothing out.

It was all so different from her life with Spencer. She had accidentally said out loud once, and Catalina had asked why. So Julene told her, realizing as she did so that she had never before told her own story to herself before.

She had married Spencer because he loved her, because he had a good job at a bank and her parents approved of him. She had had better prospects of course – richer and with better positions - but she liked his face and the way he acted, and how he understood that she wanted to wait until marriage to do anything – physical. She liked his pleasant, soft, closemouthed kisses and the feel of his large hand linked with her small one. Her parents paid for their wedding, and it was a beautiful ceremony. She had five bridesmaids and her little cousin served as their flower girl, and she was perfectly happy, until the wedding night.

He had picked her up and carried her through the door of their honeymoon suite, laying her on the bed, and then started kissing her face and neck. That was pleasant enough, but fear rose up in her when he started to undress her, his hands shaking a little, when he knelt over and she felt his hot breath on her shoulder. Her body trembled and drew away from the feel of his hands on her skin. He apologized when she cried out after a hard squeeze of her breast, but resumed touching her, undoing zippers until she was bare before him.

Her mother had told her what would happen, so she was prepared, but she still had to bite her lip to stifle a scream of pain as he pushed inside her. He kissed her lips briefly and murmured

“Alright?” and she managed to nod, not wanting to stop him, closing her eyes and waiting for it to be over. It seemed to take forever for him to finish, and when he had collapsed on her, sweaty and limp, she could see the blood staining her thin thighs.

It never got any better. Alma mustered her courage and brought up the subject with her mother, her friends and her elderly doctor, but none of them could tell her anything that could make it better. She prayed desperately to become pregnant so she could have an excuse to put him off, and was wretchedly thankful when she got sick and had an excuse to ask him to sleep in the guest bedroom. After awhile she hated it every time he kissed her hair or held her hand. She felt nauseous whenever he gave her that smile over dinner that meant he would be turning towards her and pushing down the coverlet as soon as she turned off the lamp. She redid their bedroom and got two of those new twin beds so she wouldn't have to feel his skin brush against hers when they slept.

The only thing she enjoyed about it was the possibility of pregnancy. She was disappointed when her period came after the honeymoon, but sang all throughout the first month of marriage, sure that she was already pregnant. But a month went by, and then another, and then it had been six months and nothing. Her mother and friends all told her that it was normal, that she was young and she had plenty of time.

After a year and a half she woke up one morning knowing that something was wrong. Spencer was skeptical, but he agreed to go in with her, and he held her a few weeks later when the doctor told her that she would never be able to bear children.

In some marriages this might have caused a discord, but Spencer, still desperately in love with his wife, declared that he wanted nothing more than to adopt a child who needed a good home. In due time they were approved to adopt, got to the top of the list and chose Julene from her crib at the hospital about a hundred miles away. After that, she could put up with anything

from Spencer as long as she had Julene. She had never been happier.

The usual call of “Lights out, ladies,” came at 9 PM, before Alma was done with her story, and Catalina scooted to the far side of the bed, patting the sandpaper sheet for Alma to lay beside her. When she was done, Catalina silently put her arms around her, and Alma felt so warm and happy and comforted that she fell asleep.

She woke up honey-slow the next morning, drenched with pleasure that came in rolling waves through her entire body. She squirmed a little against the mattress, making it squeak, and giggled at the feel of Catalina’s curl tickling her bare thigh. At that, her eyes snapped open and she pushed up on her elbows, looking down at the top of Catalina’s head.

“Lina!” she tried to snap, but her voice wouldn’t quite obey her. “What are you doing? What – aah – why are you-“ Her voice stopped and she collapsed back against the bed, gripping the sheets with her roughened hands and feeling beads of sweat rise up between her breasts. “Catalina – Lina- God! Oh God!”

After, Catalina came up and tried to kiss her, but Alma hit out wildly, striking her on the shoulder. She scrambled out from under Catalina, trying to pull her clothes back into shape with fingers that refused to obey her.

“What’s with you?” Catalina asked, pouting. She leaned back on her heels. Her hair was disheveled and for some reason that enraged Alma even more. “Don’t tell me you didn’t like it.”

“There’s nothing to like,” Alma half-shrieked. Everything was spinning out of control. “Nothing happened! Or nothing should have happened! Why did you do that?”

“I didn’t hear you saying no, *chica*,” Catalina said icily. “Or maybe I just couldn’t hear you over all the moaning.”

Alma was too upset even to be embarrassed that that. She scrubbed at her skin with her fingernails, leaving raised red marks and wishing that it was a shower day. She felt filthy and disgusting. How could she let some woman – some trashy Mexican – do that to her? When the morning bell rang, she hurried out ahead of Catalina, and didn’t speak to her for the rest of the day.

She never wanted to see Catalina again, but it wasn’t like the prison would just give her a new roommate because she asked politely. So she hung her towel the wrong way for four days in a row, ignoring Catalina all the while. At first Catalina was furious, then resentful, and then finally hurt. But on the morning of the fourth day she slashed Alma with the sharp edge of her wedding ring. Alma got fifteen stitches, but she also got a new roommate, and she never told anyone what had happened.

CHAPTER NINE: COURT

Court figured out his brilliant plan when he heard Julene on the phone.

He'd walked into the kitchen to grab a snack, but stilled when he heard Julene's hushed voice on the phone. He started to automatically back away, giving her her privacy, but then paused. Ignoring the twinges of guilt, he leaned back in the shadows and eavesdropped for all he was worth.

"Alma's gone this weekend – she's meeting with some friend in the city, I don't know," Julene was saying. "We could go to that bar, the one I told you about? It's about thirty miles towards the city, across from that one grill with the really good hamburgers? Yeah, that one. We could stop there and then go to that cheap motel next door . . . no, you don't need a fake or anything, they don't really care. Yeah, Friday. Yeah, okay. You too."

Court tiptoed away just as Julene hung up, feeling elated. Now he just had to tell Ms. Roberts – Elaine – his plan.

"I don't know," Elaine said, frowning. Today she was wearing a little white top with the first three buttons unbuttoned, which was making it hard for Court to fully concentrate on what she was saying. "This really seems overly elaborate. If you think your mom isn't treating Julene right, I'm legally obligated to report it, you know."

"Yeah, but my mom would never forgive me if she knew I told anyone," Court said honestly. "And they might not even believe me. This way, it's perfect – you'll see my mom freak at Julene, and she'll *have* to let Julene go live at Alma's."

“I just really don’t think I can be a part of this, Court. It’s certainly not part of my job, and it seems pretty unethical too.”

Court leaned forward. “Can’t we please just try it? We can drive out on Friday night, and if you think we shouldn’t do it, then we won’t. We’ll just go home again.”

Elaine clearly was undecided. “I actually don’t have a car,” she said, and Court smiled at her.

“We can take mine,” he said.

Court picked up Elaine outside the library at nine on Friday night, like they had agreed. He’d changed his clothes four times before, feeling ridiculous, he decided on a tight blue tee shirt and his best jeans. He put on some cologne, before feeling like a tool and washing it all off.

Elaine was wearing a little black dress and heels. She looked amazing, and Court could smell her perfume when she got into his car. “Hi,” he said absurdly, and blushed when she smiled at him.

They parked outside the bar, and Court turned the car’s engine off. He felt incredibly awkward suddenly, just sitting there as the car’s engine ticked as the engine cooled. Was he supposed to talk about school stuff?

“Court,” Elaine said, and he looked over at her. She was really close to him, and had taken off her seatbelt. He only had a minute to wish he had taken off his too before she kissed him.

He let her set the pace for a minute, feeling uncertain, before regaining some composure. He’d totally made out with girls before; he knew what to do. He pulled back enough to undo his seatbelt, then angled his head so her neck wasn’t at an

awkward angle, and kissed her again.

The straps of her dress had been pushed off her shoulders and his shirt was off before he realized that time had passed, and he pulled back with a gasp, remembering the plan. He scanned the parking lot and saw Amanda and Julene's cars. "Shit!" he said, checking the clock. It was nearly ten. "I have to call Frank."

Elaine pulled back. "Are you sure you want to do this, Court?"

He wanted to a lot less now that he'd gotten to make out with her, but was determined to stick to the plan. Frank answered on the second ring. They'd decided on him by default, because he was both an adult Court trusted and too lame to be out on a Friday night. It would have been too suspicious for Elaine to make the call, and he couldn't call his mom directly because he was supposed to be sleeping over at his friend Mike's. "Frank? Hi, it's Court. I was wondering if you could do me a favor? Julene's out at a bar with Amanda and I'm worried about her - I was wondering if you could call my mom and ask if she could pick Julene up? Yeah, thanks." He hung up before Frank could ask any questions, and smiled at Elaine. "We have awhile before my mom could make it out here."

They made out for almost half an hour before Elaine reluctantly stopped and buttoned up her dress. "I'd better go get in place for the showdown," she said, and got out of the car, smoothing down her skirt as he went. Court prudently put his own shirt back on and sat back in his seat to wait for her.

She came running out of the bar in less than a minute, and jerked open the car door. "Court," she said frantically. "This isn't just any bar, it's a gay bar, and Julene and Amanda are in the back making out!"

His mind went completely blank. "What?" he managed.

“They didn’t see me, but it was pretty obvious – there’s only about four girls in that place.”

“Oh my god,” Court said. He rummaged for his phone and called Frank. “Oh my god, pick up, pick up. . . Frank! Did you call my mom? Oh god. Can you call her back and say you made a mistake? Say that Julene just showed up at your door or something, I don’t know! Okay, call me back when you’ve done it.” He hung up. “Thank god. He’s going to call my mom and stop her. She’s the biggest homophobe ever – she would absolutely lost it if she saw Julene and Amanda together.” His caller ID flashed ‘Frank’ at him, and he picked up. “Hello? Oh good, thank you so so much. I’ll explain later, okay? But she’s definitely turning around. Oh great, thanks. You’ve saved my life.” He hung up again, breathing out a huge sigh of relief. “He caught her in time, she’s only about halfway here.”

Elaine smiled at him. “Do you think I should go in and warn her, just in case?”

“No, how would you explain being here? She’ll still get in trouble for being out without permission, but Danielle will probably cover for her. It’ll be fine.” He hesitated, wondering if she would suggest that they go home now, but she didn’t seem to be doing so. “Do you want to move to the backseat?” he asked, like he was in a terrible 80s movie or something, and blushing bright red. Luckily, she seemed to be okay with his tremendous awkwardness.

It was only by chance that he glanced up just as his mom’s Subaru pulled up in the parking lot. He let out an extremely undignified shriek, and Elaine looked up from what she was doing. “Oh, no,” he whispered.

It only took a few minutes before Alma came out of the bar, Julene and Amanda in tow. They were holding hands, but he couldn’t see anything else in the darkness. They got in the backseat of Toni’s car – how had she managed to get them to go

with her – and they drove off.

Court moved up to the front seat, praying that the engine would start on the first try. He threw his phone at Elaine. “Call Danielle and tell her what happened!” he shouted, peeling rubber on the way out of the driveway. But he had to stop and drop off Elaine in town before he could go home – his mom couldn’t know he’d been out with her – so by the time he got home, his mom’s car was already in the driveway, along with – Frank’s? And Alma’s?

He could hear his mom screaming as soon as he got out of the car, and he flung open the front door to see Alma and Toni facing off. His mom’s face was bright red, and her eyes were blazing. She looked completely insane. They didn’t even notice him coming in. Julene and Amanda were still holding hands, looking terrified. Frank was standing in the corner, looking weirdly smug.

“I should have known your daughter would be a dyke!” Toni screamed at Alma, and Court saw Julene flinch. “After everything I’ve done for her!”

“Don’t blame her for what Amanda did!” Alma yelled back, and it was Amanda’s turn to flinch.

“Don’t you dare say that about my daughter,” a quiet voice said from behind him, which oddly enough, seemed to cut through the screaming. He turned and saw Danielle, feeling like a frightened child, just grateful to see a rational adult in the room. “Amanda, Julene, come with me.”

Danielle’s arrival seemed to make Toni and Alma aware of their surroundings, and Court had just started to think that this might end without bloodshed before Frank spoke up.

“You know, I’ve never really considered how alike Court and Amanda look before,” he said thoughtfully, and everyone

stared at him like he was crazy. “I guess it’s just lucky that Amanda inherited the gay gene instead of Court.”

Court had no idea what was going on, but Danielle inhaled sharply and all the color drained from Toni’s face. She stared at him like she’d never seen him before, then turned and looked at Amanda. “What do you mean?” she asked, and her voice was so dead that Court shuddered.

“I mean,” Frank said nastily, “that I finally figured it out. Danielle has never said anything about Amanda’s father, but it had to have been someone in town. It had to be someone married, or Danielle would have made them child support. Danielle hates you, but she’s always been close to Court. Everyone’s scrutinized everyone it could have possibly been for years – but Frank died before Amanda was born.”

Court was stunned. He looked at Amanda, seeing her eyes fill with tears. Was she really his half-sister?

“Well,” Toni said, and every eye in the room turned back to her. “Isn’t this interesting.” She was looking at Danielle, who had her chin raised high.

“It’s been a long time, Toni,” Danielle said evenly. “I just want to take my daughter home.” She motioned to Amanda, who pulled away from Julene and started moving towards her mother.

“Your daughter. . . and my husband’s?” Toni asked. Her voice had taken on that poisonous sweetness that before had always meant that she was about to do something to Julene.

“We don’t need to into that now –“ Danielle began, and Court had the terrible feeling that something was about to happen before his mother strode to the hall table and pulled out the gun he had forgotten was there, his father’s gun, that they kept there in case of burglars.

Danielle froze, Amanda beside her. There was a feeling of

unreality in the air, like this was a movie and everyone was just acting a part. Toni pointed the gun at her, calmly.

“Honestly, I’ve wanted to do this for years,” she said, and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER TEN: TONI

Toni was the only child in first grade who couldn't recite the alphabet, but she had her own recital she had perfected: Jameson's, Bailey's, Coors, Bud, whiskey, vodka, gin. She knew how to mix a screwdriver before she'd mastered counting, and that she needed to call her daddy's boss and say he was sick on the mornings when he wasn't awake before she left for school. She struggled to learn long division at the kitchen table while her mama lay passed out in the floor, surrounded by puddles of her own liquids, grey face limp against the tile.

She probably would have died there, from neglect or malnutrition or loneliness, if it hadn't been for her brother. Spencer was only three years older, but he was capable of everything. He borrowed a book from the library and figured out how to fix the shower when it broke, he manhandled their father into bed when he was too far gone to walk, and he patiently spent hours teaching Toni after school so she was able to catch up to her class.

Her daddy finally lost his job the day after she graduated the fifth grade, and he couldn't or wouldn't get another one. They sold the house her grandparents had given them as a wedding present, and moved into a series of rented homes, then apartments that got dingier and dingier. Toni and Spencer learned their mother's PIN code and paid the bills, bought the groceries, and signed innumerable permission slips from school in a copy of her mother's scrawl.

Everyone knew of course that Toni's parents were drunks, but she was inconspicuous enough that no one bothered to make fun of her. For a long time she was a small, undernourished girl whose blonde hair was her only standout feature.

Toni didn't really blossom until after her father's death

(liver failure, long overdue). She stood over his grave, fifteen and small for her age, tearless and smiling, holding her brother's hand. One half of her burden was finally lifted. Her mother was comparatively much easier to deal with as long as she had her bottle and her soiled bed, and Toni had all her time free to spend with her brother. He got a delivery route that summer so Toni could have some clothes that weren't secondhand, and she learned to cook so that he could have something to come home to at the end of the day. Spencer grew in huge spurts and ate to compensate; he seemed to absorb everything she cooked and asked for more. Beanpole-skinny, he shot up six inches that summer on a diet of pasta, bread, and vegetables from the garden Toni had painstakingly dug in the back.

Toni had never been happier. Always introverted and avoidant of other children because of their situation, she and Spencer spent every moment of their time together. Although he moved to the high school while she was still in junior high, he still waited outside the gates every afternoon to walk her home. Looking up at him, Toni thought no girl had ever had a handsomer brother. He was seventeen and all the girls wanted him even though he didn't have a car and couldn't afford to take anyone out, and was never to be found at the local hotspots. He could have had friends aplenty if he had been willing to make the effort. But he never seemed interested in anyone but Toni, until Alma came along.

Physically, Alma was exquisitely beautiful. She had a face that could have been carved from marble, with a fall of full red hair that cascaded past her shoulders. Her figure was perfect and her skin a flawless ivory that every other girl in school struggled to imitate. She was studious but not intellectual, pleasant but not overly compassionate, happy but never joyful. Toni studied her rival for hours, bitter hatred eating away at her, as Spencer stared raptly at her face as if her every utterance was his own personal gospel. He wouldn't hear a word against her, and the first serious

fight of their lives occurred when Toni demanded that he stop seeing her and he refused.

Spencer got scholarships to a few good schools in the area, but he eventually chose the state university, where Alma was going. Toni understood that she had lost him finally when his weekend visits home dwindled from every weekend to every other weekend, and then finally to once a month.

Toni was left alone at home, with three years before she could join him at college. She got an afternoon job at the florists, arranging flowers day after day, smiling at customers, coming home to try and force her mother to eat something every night, doing her homework. It was a boring, meaningless existence, and that was probably why Toni agreed to go on a date with Robert Carey, to let him kiss her and grope her breasts, and then to have sex in the back of his car, parked out in the woods. She didn't love him, but he made her feel something, and that was a rare enough feeling that she saw him at every opportunity after that.

It took her a long time to realize she was pregnant. Her only information on sex and pregnancy had come from a furiously-blushing Spencer, and he had barely known more than her. She knew there was some kind of contraceptive to be used, but she vaguely supposed that Robert took care of all that. Always thin, her stomach didn't swell until the fourth month of her pregnancy, when she finally realized what her missed periods and daily nausea meant.

When she told Robert, she didn't expect him to offer to marry her – she had very few illusions about herself and their relationship. But he insisted and she finally gave in, grateful to finally get out of that house and be able to raise her baby with someone else. She had enough of a belly that they got married in a registry office instead of a church. She was sixteen, and she lost the baby only a few weeks after their rushed wedding.

Everyone said it was a blessing in disguise – not to her face, but under their breath. She and Robert could both finish

high school now, and grow up a little before they tried again. Robert was an ideal husband, as if he had read some manual on how to be a husband to the girl one had accidentally impregnated, who had then miscarried. He was strictly Catholic, and Toni knew that he wouldn't divorce her even though he'd only married her because he'd had to.

The second time she'd gotten pregnant had also been an accident – she didn't know that antibiotics would affect the Pill. The night she found out, Robert came home late, looking weighed down by something.

“Toni,” he'd began, but she'd been too excited to let him speak. She'd announced that she was pregnant, and seen him go whiter than she'd ever seen him. He dropped his head into his hands, and she'd opened her mouth to ask what was wrong before he lifted his head and smiled at her.

Her labor was excruciating – her pelvis was shaped oddly, and it took almost three days of labor before her beautiful, beautiful baby boy was born. Robert wanted to name him Courtney, a family name, and she agreed, face alight and laughing with joy at the wonder of this small person who had come from her body.

After it had been a few months since the birth, she tried every trick she knew from magazines, making his favorite dinners, always keeping the house neat, and reaching for him in bed. He hadn't touched her for a few months after she gave birth, which she attributed to his thoughtfulness, but he didn't respond to her even after she had fully regained her thin figure.

He didn't love her, and it only made it worse every time she and he had dinner with Spencer and Alma. Spencer watched Alma with an aching tenderness in his eyes, absorbed in her every expression, and Toni could have killed her because it was obvious Alma didn't love him back. What, she wondered, did it say about her and her brother, that they had both married people who were

kind and considerate and all that the world considered good, but that couldn't return their love?

INTERLUDE THREE: JULENE IN DEFEAT

Julene isn't sure if she should count her time with Amanda as losing her virginity. It felt like it, at the time – and it had to have counted, otherwise lesbians would be virgins their whole lives, and that didn't seem right. But she didn't really feel like she really lost it until she drunkenly prepositioned Brent from the basketball team and he had her in the grass of the elementary school.

It was all over school the next day of course – Julene had been sloppy drunk, and Brent wasn't exactly discreet. After the first two periods, she couldn't stand Brent's smirking, and so she got in her car and chainsmoked a pack of Marlboro menthols, relishing the burn in her throat as she drove too fast on the dry roads. Alma tried to talk to her when Julene got home that night, but she was ridiculously easy to avoid. Toni didn't care whether Julene had her door closed or not, but Alma apparently respected Julene's privacy enough to barge in.

She didn't bother going to school the rest of that week. Alma informed her timidly that there were events going on in the larger world; Amanda was getting released from the hospital and Toni had made bail, but was forbidden from coming into contact with any of them. Court came over once or twice, but she sat in front of her bedroom door whenever she heard his car pull up, letting Alma make her excuses.

It's Friday, so she takes her car about thirty miles down the road to a roadside bar. She's underage, but she wore tiny denim shorts and a tube top, and no one seems to want to card her. She finds a guy who buys her shot after shot of tequila, then takes her back to his crummy apartment where she drifts in and out of awareness, only vaguely aware of his presence over her. Later, she is violently sick in his bathroom, and he kicks her out. She naps in her car until noon, when she goes home to crawl into bed, not even showering first.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: AMANDA

Amanda tossed the book aside in disgust. Someone had given her *Eat, Pray, Love* as a ‘sorry your ex-girlfriend’s aunt went crazy and tried to shoot your mom’ gift, which meant that someone didn’t know her very well. She despised stories where wealthy, white women went to foreign countries and rediscovered their spirituality or sexuality or whatever. What bullshit. The only travel books she liked were the ones where the author totally made fun of whatever country they were in.

Danielle had finally gone home, after Amanda had said: “Mom, don’t you want to go home and take a shower?” then “Mom, I’m really fine here. You can go clean up,” and finally, “Mom. You seriously smell and I can’t stand it a minute longer. Go home and shower, for chrissake.” Amanda appreciated her mom, and she knew that Danielle totally felt guilty even though Toni’s crazy-ass behavior wasn’t her fault. But she was a little lonely now, and it wasn’t like Julene was going to show up. Amanda had given up on that idea after about the fifth day, when Alma stopped by with balloons which she said that Julene had picked. Right. If Julene had wanted to give her a hospital president, it would have been an issue of *Playgirl* or a teddy bear with its head cut off, or something equally inappropriate. No, Amanda was apparently now the girl who got dumped in the hospital, which sucked big time.

After a few weeks of (in Amanda’s opinion) completely unnecessary bed confinement and tests, she was finally allowed to go home. If this was a movie, she could have gone rock climbing or fought bad guys or something, five minutes after getting shot in the stomach. Since this was real life, she burst into tears trying to climb the stairs to the front door, which set her mom off, so they were both crying like idiots on the front lawn while everyone else on their crappy street probably peered at them from behind their lace curtains and whispered. Amanda suddenly knew what celebrities must feel like when their sex tapes or nude photos leaked: everyone who wanted to now knew something about her

life that she wouldn't necessarily have shared with the class.

She waited to go see Julene until she didn't want to whimper like a kicked puppy whenever she stood up. Her mom had bullied the teachers into letting her do all her assignments online, so she didn't have to go to school, but that also meant that she was missing out on the gossip. Danielle said that everyone whispered about her whenever she went anywhere, so she wasn't able to get any info about Julene either, and Alma unconvincingly lied that Julene was out doing something whenever she called. So Amanda, like the biggest creeper ever, went over to Alma's after midnight, grabbed the key tucked under the back door mat, and let herself into Julene's room. It was a little stalkerish, but whatever. Julene should have known that she wouldn't give up that easily.

Julene's room was never exactly what Alma would call 'pristine,' but it was now past 'totally trashed' and into '*Hoarders*' territory. Amanda almost expected an overly-cheerful personal organizer and a team of garbage men to come leaping out and demand that Julene confront her personal demons – which, to be fair, were undoubtedly legion. The room was cold, and Julene was tucked under the covers, only the tip of her nose visible. Amanda briefly considered poking her or something, before simply easing into the bed and spooning up behind Julene. She was cold, and her stomach hurt.

Julene made a little 'I'm not ready to get up and why are you trying to make me, you hateful person' sound, and snuggled back into Amanda, which unfortunately meant that she was not at all awake yet. They hadn't slept in the same bed since before sleeping in the same bed would have been a totally innocent activity (on Julene's part, at least), and Amanda took a moment to simply enjoy it before shaking Julene awake. She knew she had succeeded when Julene's body stiffened.

“Amanda?” she whispered, like girls snuck into her bed at night all the time, which Amanda really hoped they didn’t.

“Are we broken up?” Amanda responded, and then mentally slapped herself in the forehead, because she definitely hadn’t meant to say that. She blamed the painkillers.

Julene turned in bed so she was facing Amanda. She had mascara smeared all the way down her cheeks, like she had cried herself to sleep without removing her makeup, which made Amanda’s heart ache. Although, since when had Julene worn mascara? “I assumed Toni did that for me, although she went about it a little differently than I would have,” Julene responded, trying to sound emotionless, and *ob*. This had to be true love, because Amanda felt guilty and irritated and adoring and longing all at once.

That much emotion was giving her a headache, so she frowned at Julene to convey the depth of her disapproval. “You are not responsible for Toni’s craziness,” she said automatically, after repeating it to Danielle so many times. “Although if you think I’m going to put out after you didn’t even bring me flowers in the hospital, you are seriously mistaken.”

Julene didn’t even smile at that. “I’ve fucked up so badly,” she said. “I thought- I’ve been doing some shit -“

“It’s okay,” Amanda interrupted. At some point they would probably have to talk about why Julene had been MIA, but that point didn’t have to be now. “I’m just glad that it wasn’t worse. At least you’re adopted.”

Julene stared at her. “What?”

“Dude, your uncle was apparently my father. If you weren’t adopted, we would have been cousins, and our gay-tastic Lifetime movie lesbian romance would have had a incesty redneck flair, which I for one am just not comfortable with.”

There was a terrible long silence, before Julene let out an incredibly disgusting snort and started laughing hysterically, turning into the pillow to try and mute it. Amanda smiled, pulling up the covers and settling into Julene's bed. They were going to be okay.

The End.

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