

Broken Key

Whoever coined the phrase “butterflies in your stomach” obviously never had to deal with anything truly nerve-wracking, because what I had in my stomach was more like a flock of manic vampire birds trying to claw their way out of my gut. My throat was dry, so I kept swallowing, but that just made my mouth dry, too. Every neuron screamed at me to turn and run. Somehow I was still walking up the long driveway.

If you could call what I was doing “walking.” More like jittering. Or waddling. Gravel crunching under my toes had the hair at the back of my neck standing on end, and I nearly jumped right out of my skin every time a bird chirped from a perch in the trees. My hand instinctively reached for the broken key leaning heavily against my chest. It was supposed to be reassuring. Right now, it felt like a noose.

It didn’t help that the mansion at the end of the driveway was looming over me, trying to cage me in its cold glare. Not that it had eyes. Or a face. Or...any kind of feature that would give it the ability to glare at me. But it still made me shiver.

I stopped on the doorstep. Was I supposed to knock? Or was I supposed to invite myself in? Even though Hollie asked me to come, was I really welcome here?

You’re not part of my family.

The broken key burned against my skin. Clapping my hand over it, I staggered back a step, and then the front door swung inwards, and a border collie darted into the yard with a jingling collar. I looked up to find Hollie standing in front of me.

My heart stopped. The vampire birds shoved bile into my throat, and I prayed I could keep myself from throwing up all over Hollie.

Her sharp eyes snapped onto me. She seemed to be taller than when I last saw her, and even more beautiful. If that was possible. “Molly,” she said. “How long were you standing there?”

It was all I could do to not hug her. Or throw up on her. “I--I just got here,” I stammered. I tucked the key under my shirt, hoping she wouldn’t notice, but her gaze caught the motion.

She did a visual sweep of the driveway and saw no vehicles other than her car, no movement other than her border collie. “Grandma didn’t bring you?”

“She was busy. I walked.”

“You *walked*. Five miles, and you just *walked*. Why didn’t you call me? I would’ve picked you up. Or do you *enjoy* the risk of getting mugged?” Oh, how I knew that tone. It was the same tone she used when she got between Mom and Dad’s arguments. The same

one she used to defend me from Dad's verbal abuse. The same one she used to scold me for doing stupid, self-destructive things.

I hung my head. "I'm sorry," I murmured.

She stepped aside to allow me space to enter the mansion. "Well, come in."

I walked inside. The air was thick, stuffed with memories and tears and broken hearts and cigarette burns. My eyes stung. "Gavin's looking for some sort of plant in the woods." Hollie shut the door. "He'll be back in about an hour."

Gavin. Her fiance. The reason I was here. She wanted me to meet my future brother-in-law before the wedding. Because she had the strength to move on with her life.

"Okay." I didn't know what else to say.

"Let's talk in the sunroom," she said. She led the way. I knew where the sunroom was, but it was far easier to breathe with her leading, because then she couldn't see the jerky way I was walking. Vampire birds feeding on your stomach lining is kind of a movement inhibitor.

The sunroom was a bit different than the last time I was here. The pillows were new, the furniture was rearranged, the armchairs were reupholstered. I jolted up to the window seat and looked out at the expansive back yard. Our quaint little treehouse sat where it always had in its big oak tree. Just the sight of it made the broken key feel a thousand times heavier. Such a small object for such a large burden.

We used to escape from everything in that treehouse. Mom's death, Dad's drunken rages, the bullies at school--none of that existed when we hid ourselves there. The only pain it had ever caused was when I was ten and fell out and broke my leg. Hollie was the one who was my solace then. She called an ambulance and comforted me while I cried. And when Dad came storming into the hospital, she stopped him from slaughtering me with cuss words.

It's okay, she had told me. I won't let him hurt you.

Now the treehouse was patched up with new planks and boards. A toolbox sat in the grass near the tree. "Gavin's helping me fix it," Hollie said. She sat down in one of the armchairs. "He's not the most handy person, though, so I'm doing most of the fixing."

I sank into the window seat. She was so casual, like nothing had ever torn a rift between us. How did she do it? "Are you mad I didn't go to Dad's funeral?" I asked.

She pursed her lips. Lifted her chin and crossed her legs. "You made your choice. It's in the past now."

I did make a choice. I made a selfish choice, and it shadowed me every day of my life. Just because it was in the past didn't mean I was free of it. Quite the opposite, in fact. I

couldn't sleep without remembering Mom's funeral. I couldn't think without remembering Dad. I couldn't walk without feeling that stupid broken key press against my heart. Well, I couldn't walk in general.

You're not part of my family.

Hollie's fingers tapped the armrests of her chair. She uncrossed her legs, only to cross them the opposite way. She leaned forward. Leaned back. I touched the key and rifled through conversation topics. No, this definitely wasn't awkward.

"Are you mad at me?" It was barely a whisper; I couldn't convince my voice to raise any louder than that.

Those sharp eyes cut a hole right to my soul. "About what?"

"About anything."

"Molly, why are you so convinced that I'm mad at you?" she demanded.

I shrugged. Heat welled under my skin while tears welled in my eyes. "You sound angry."

"I always sound angry. Don't take it personally."

The way she said it made me wince. I bit my lip. Her expression softened slightly, and she once again uncrossed her legs, this time resting her hands on her knees and shifting forward. "Everyone responds differently to trauma," she said. "I locked myself up years ago. You know that."

My gaze drifted to her hands. Jagged white scars distorted her otherwise flawless skin. I remembered the day her hands were covered in blood. *Go away*, she had said. *It's not safe for you here.*

But I--

Go away, Molly!

"Why did you stay with Dad?" I asked. "Why didn't you come to Grandma's with me? Why didn't we call CPS or the police or someone?"

She looked past me, at the treehouse poised in the yard. Dad was the one who built it for us. I was too young to remember, but Hollie told me stories about how Mom would entertain me while Hollie and Dad put it together board by board. Hollie insisted that it had a key. So after church one Sunday morning, he took her to buy one. It was old and rusty and didn't actually lock or unlock anything, but it was the thought that counted.

"I thought I could help him," she said. "I thought I could change him back to the way he was before Mom died." She shook her head. "I should've realized he was too far gone, especially after what he did to you."

"Then why did you send me away?"

When her eyes met mine, a fortified wall prevented me from seeing any emotion behind them. "Show me your scar," she ordered.

I rolled up my sleeve. The cigarette burn on my shoulder was vibrant as ever.

"That's why," she said.

Lowering my gaze, I tugged my sleeve back down. "I thought you wanted me out of your life."

"Out of my life? What the hell's wrong with you? Why would I ever want you out of my life? Did some moron at school suggest that, or did you come up with--"

She stopped as the tears began pouring down my cheeks. I covered my mouth with my hand to try to hold back my sobs, but my heart ached so much that they escaped anyways. The key burned like fire against my chest.

You're not part of my family.

It was a moment before Hollie stood. She sat down beside me and put her arm around me once I leaned into her shoulder. Her hand stroked my hair. "I was mad at you," she admitted. "I wanted you to go to Dad's funeral, because I needed you to be there with me. You made me strong."

Afraid to speak, I shook my head. She tightened her grip on me. "You made me strong, Molly. All those times I stood up to Dad was because of you. And I was mad that you didn't go to his funeral. But I figured out how to move on."

I wiped my tears away. They were immediately replaced by new ones. "How do you forget about the past?"

"You never forget. You forgive."

"I don't think I can forgive Dad."

"Not Dad. Yourself." She lifted the broken key and traced the rusty edges with her scarred fingers. "If you don't forgive yourself, you'll be broken forever."

Forgive myself. What an interesting concept. "But Dad said--"

"Dad said all kinds of things. You need to figure out the difference between when he was lying and when he was telling the truth."

He told me I wasn't a part of his family. Then he held his cigarette against my shoulder until I screamed, all because I had defended Hollie. I tried to escape him by running to the treehouse, but he took the key from me and broke it.

Hollie came home from work three minutes later. She found out what he had done, and she went out to the treehouse and tried to tear it apart with her bare hands. The blood wouldn't stop gushing, but she wouldn't stop, either.

Dad was right. I wasn't part of his family. Our family died with Mom. But now Hollie was starting a new family with Gavin, and hopefully I could be part of it.

"You really never wanted me out of your life?" I asked.

"Never. I love you, Molly."

The tears filled my vision. Hollie held me, just like she did when we were kids. "It's okay," she whispered. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

I yanked the broken key off my neck and held it in my palm. It carried so much more weight than its rusty appearance suggested. Too much. So I let it slip between my fingers and fall to the floor--forgiven, but not forgotten.