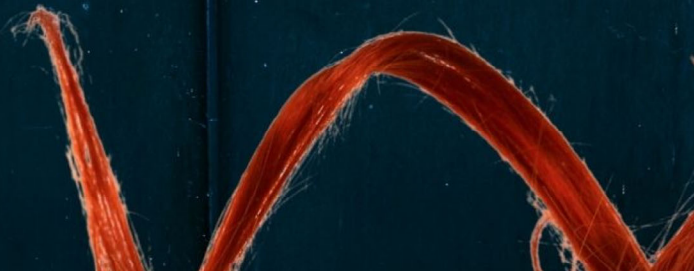


SARA ENNIS

TWO LIES

A TRUTH

A prequel to The Dollhouse



This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

TWO LIES AND A TRUTH

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Written by Sara Ennis.

Saturday December 21, 1996

Three girls walking their dog discovered the body. The mutt, off leash despite park rules, refused to come when called. Neighbors in expensive homes at the edge of the popular woodland park reported hearing the girls' screams even through windows closed against the December chill.

The detective shared this information without any notable emotion.

Freddy, on the other hand, forced himself to stay in the chair, struggled not to jump up and run from the small room with the bright white light.

"I apologize. This is tough to look at." The detective said, but didn't sound sorry at all. He slid the large color photo toward Freddy. "This is how we found her."

Freddy did not want to look, but couldn't help it.

In the photograph, a thick layer of wet leaves, in varying shades of browns and reds and yellow, set a sharp contrast to the young woman lying face up among them. Butter blonde hair, long and silky, was arranged intentionally around her head like a sun crown. In life, her eyes were a bright, watery blue. In death, the blue was flat and dull. Two twigs held the lids open. Her perfect nose had been shattered. Her left cheek was a stippled dark purple with flecks of red and blue, the right cheek still porcelain smooth and perfectly unmarred. Her lips were completely obliterated, shredded by tree branch the size of an adult forearm that had been pushed deep into her throat.

The only thing she wore was a thick blue wool cardigan he knew to be a prized possession. It had been purchased in a small shop in Galway. Freddy knew this because he'd been with her. Now, in this horrific photo taken in the woods of Michigan, the buttons were torn away, revealing what was left of a pink lace bra and large, firm breasts above a sturdy rib cage and flat belly. She had an athletic build, currently on display for all to see. Her waxed pubis, normally concealed by panties or a bikini, was creamy white, except where it was crusted with thick, rust-colored blood. Her vaginal area looked like ground beef. Another limb seemed to pro-

trude from her anus, causing her hips to tilt up and slightly to the right. Her bare legs were spread wide, the left knee broken at an impossible angle, the lower leg slanting in a way it could not possibly bend naturally.

His sister looked like a psychopath's Barbie doll.

Freddy turned and vomited into a black plastic trash container.

The detective made soothing noises, offered a glass of water, a can of settling soda. Freddy did not respond, but rather focused on a spot just to the left of the gaping mouth of the trash can, waiting to learn if his stomach had emptied or if there was more to come.

He hated vomiting, despised it, was in fact alarmed by it. It made him think of his mother, and the terrible smell of boozy sick, after her drinking bouts. Especially the last bout. Her 40th birthday. Her last everything.

"Fred, pal, you okay? I know this is tough to look at." The detective said with fake sympathy, and pushed a generic brand of tissues across the table toward him.

Freddy's stomach settled to relatively solid footing, and he straightened, took a couple of the tissues and carefully wiped around his mouth and chin. He dropped the soiled tissues on top of the sludge in the bottom of the can and set the whole thing away from him.

"Why are you showing me this? You don't need my confirmation that this is my sister, do you?" Freddy finally asked in a hoarse whisper. He cleared his throat. "You didn't show this to my father? He's not a well man."

The detective pressed three fingers onto the surface of the photograph and spun the image away from Freddy, back toward himself. "No father needs to see something like this." Finally, his words felt genuine.

Freddy asked again, feeling stronger now that the image of his sister – like that – wasn't facing him. "Why are you showing it to me? Why did you ask me to stop here before going home?"

"Your father said you were coming back from college for Christmas break, and it seemed logical to ask you to stop here, instead of coming to the house."

Freddy wished he'd accepted the offer of water. His mouth tasted dreadful.

"I understand you and Felicity have – excuse me, had – a somewhat contentious relationship. That you tormented her." The detective said this mildly, but his eyes never left Freddy's. "I have a sister. I know how obnoxious they can be."

Freddy felt himself regaining control. Thank God. "I'm not sure who told you that, but it's not true. I did not torment Felicity. She was the mentor. But that's neither here nor there."

"How did she torment you? Can you give me an example?" The detective left the photo sitting between them, and quietly tapped a finger on the image, playing it off as subconscious, but Freddy knew better. When Freddy shook his head, the detective persisted. "Just one. Something basic."

Freddy said, "You know the game Two Truths and a Lie? She used to make up lies about me and claim they were truths." Terrible, disgusting things. That he tortured squirrels. Put a razor blade in the housekeeper's bar of soap. Threatened to kill the Senator in his sleep. Felicity flipped the game, so that it was two lies and a truth. But only they knew that. The truth was always the same: that Freddy cried in his bed at night.

The detective did not look impressed.

"Just older sister, younger brother stuff. She'd have her friends play tricks on me. Sometimes it veered into bullying. Nothing I couldn't handle." Freddy straightened in the chair. "Look, Detective, I appreciate you're doing your job, but I'm very concerned about my father. I came right here, as you requested. I haven't been to the house, haven't seen him yet. As I said, he's not in the best health, and I'm sure he's struggling. Felicity was the light of his life. He won't be taking this well. I'd like to go to him."

"Thanks for coming in." The detective said, and reserved the right to call him back. "And please let me know before you return to MSU."



THE SENATOR WAS NOT pleased to see him, but he was ever conscious about social conventions and would never turn his son away. Freddy wondered if his father would protect him if he thought he had killed Felicity, not out of a sense of loyalty or love, but because having one of his children kill another was just too vulgar, particularly for a man of his position.

"How are you?" Freddy asked. He sat carefully in one of two leather chairs in his father's study. His father was behind the antique desk that featured large in many of Freddy's most unpleasant childhood memories. The man looked eighty, although he was not quite sixty yet. Tall, dark and handsome, rumor had it he'd been quite the carouser before he married Elizabeth. After her death some grey had filled in around his temples, but it suited him. He had the same Caribbean blue eyes as Felicity. Freddy recalled the Senator been voted "best looking politician" a few years ago by some tabloid trash.

"My child was brutally murdered. How do you think I am?" The Senator poured two fingers of Macallan's single malt into a crystal glass and took a long pull. He did not offer his son a glass. Freddy met his father's gaze as the elder man refilled the tumbler, drained it, and asked, "Do you have anything to do with this?"

Freddy felt a stab of resentment bloom in his chest, radiate up his throat, and burn into a low, dull throb in his skull, but held himself calm. "Thank you, Father. I love you too."

The Senator closed his eyes and leaned back in the leather desk chair. "The detective said it was shocking. Angry. Probably personal."

Part of Freddy wanted to share every gory detail from the photo, to give back a little of the pain his father so casually gave to him. Instead he said, simply, "Yes."

The older man opened his eyes and focused them on Freddy. "I've scheduled the service for Friday."

"She'll be in the mausoleum with mother." It was a statement, not a question. It was a perverse idea, to Freddy, that his mother would be trapped forever next to the daughter that had inflicted such tremendous pain.

"Of course." The Senator snapped, as if he didn't understand the harm that had been done to his wife when father and daughter began their grotesque relationship, or understand how putting the two side by side in a mausoleum was cruelty extended beyond death. The Senator liked to pretend no one knew. But Freddy knew, and his mother had known.

Freddy's father was good at compartmentalizing, and even better at denying his own culpability in things that were unpleasant, which was why he was such a good politician. His blue eyes were drooping a bit from the scotch but his words were clear. "Are you staying? Or headed back to school?"

"Of course I'm staying. At least until the weekend, if the service is Friday." Freddy didn't mention the directive from the detective that he should remain in town. He crossed one leg over the other, gazed at the framed portrait on the mantle above the fireplace. His beautiful, beautiful mother, an actual beauty queen, was seated in an arm chair. His father stood behind her with one hand resting lovingly on her shoulder. In Elizabeth's arms, a smiling baby Freddy, wearing a tiny sailor outfit. To the left of the chair, four-year-old Felicity, her expression sullen as she clutched her mother's hand, trying to pull it from the baby. When had everything changed? Freddy didn't remember, exactly. He just knew it had.

"I'll let Marie know you're staying so she can plan for dinner."

And with that, Freddy was dismissed.



SUNDAY DECEMBER 22, 1996

Freddy slipped his ancient Volvo into a vacant parking spot on the street and stepped out, mindful of the icy buildup under his feet. Michigan winters were brutal, and it was frigidly cold, even with the sun bright up in the sky. Whenever he was home, he popped in for coffee and quiet time at his favorite Village shop, the Cozy Up, and that was where he headed now. The shop's large floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows were currently decorated for the holidays, red, silver, and blue ornaments were artfully placed around suggestions for readers of all ages.

Because it was the middle of the day, the mothers who congregated in the mornings were off shopping or having lunch or working out at the club, and he had the place mostly to himself. Today's barista was unfamiliar to him, but they changed regularly as boys and girls graduated from high school and left for college or other adventures.

Freddy took his Americano to an overstuffed chair by the window and sank in, glad he'd dressed warmly. Even though the shop itself was warm and toasty, the glass drew in a chill.

He was both giddy for, and dreading, the service Friday. Even though Christmas was four days away, he was sure there'd be a good turnout. The Villagers would attend, no doubt. The Senator's political colleagues would come to curry favor. Many of Felicity's college friends would make the trip, for the same reason. Her friends from boarding school? Would they recognize Freddy, now that he was a grown man and not a small, anxious child?

Outside the window, a man was digging through a large trash container installed at the corner. The Village was all about attractive, so even the waste bins were decorated with bright holiday designs. As Freddy watched, the man dug out a couple of soda cans, and three plastic soda bottles, and put them into a paper grocery bag he had at the ready.

The man was tall, with bristly red hair and a graying beard. His face was brown from the sun, and weathered, although he didn't seem particularly old. Probably one of the assemblage of homeless vets returned from the Persian Gulf. Freddy imagined he could smell him, despite the window, despite the holiday scented candles wafting through the bookstore.

Michigan in December wasn't warm on the sunniest of days. Today, with a clear sky but snow promised for later in the evening, the temperature was hovering around 25 degree Fahrenheit. The man might well be wearing everything he owned, Freddy decided, taking inventory. Heavy work boots that had seen better days. His beige Carhartt insulated pants – or maybe coveralls? it was hard to tell –were too short, exposing a few inches of denim underneath, suggesting he was wearing jeans, too. A filthy T-shirt screamed Guns N Roses. Freddy thought there might be a waffled undershirt underneath. On top of it all, he wore a gray barn coat that was too small and clung to his muscular biceps. The sleeves ended four or five inches above his wrists, which were tanned and scarred. His hands were huge, with short, thick fingers.

As Freddy watched, a young woman pulled her expensive European roadster into a spot behind Freddy's Volvo and got out. Her blonde hair was cut in a trendy style, and an expensive pink ski jacket skimmed slender hips encased in tight black jeans. A small path had been made in the gray-crusting pile of snow on the sidewalk, and she took advantage, carefully placing her fuzzy black Ugg boots to avoid shiny patches of ice. The narrow gap delivered her to the sidewalk, landing her immediately next to the large bearded man. The woman made a disgusted face, wrinkled her nose, and made a show of stepping around him.

The man smirked at her dramatics, smiled broadly, and then roared like a lion, obviously wanting to frighten her rather than harm her. She shrieked and sprinted toward the Cozy Up's door, nearly losing her footing on a small spot of ice. The man boomed with laughter, and noticed Freddy watching. He thrust his face toward Freddy, eyes large and clear

and bright, and Freddy was sure the man saw through him as clearly as if he were made of glass. Every secret, every pain, every bad act exposed. After a moment of intense connection, the vagrant hefted his backpack over his shoulder, grabbed the shopping bag of recyclables, and continued his route through the Village.

Freddy sipped his Americano. Would a man like that do more than frighten? What would it take to push him past feelings, and into action?



TUESDAY DECEMBER 24, 1996

"Jesus!" the Senator said, and slammed his fist onto the breakfast table. The orange juice pitcher rattled.

"What's the matter?" Freddy dunked a toast soldier into the runny orange center of his poached egg and popped it into his mouth.

"There's been another."

"Another what?"

The Senator folded the paper and thrust it across the table. "Killing. Butchering. Another girl."

Freddy took the paper and scanned the photo, ignoring the headline. A blonde girl beamed from what looked like a sorority photo. "I saw her the other day."

The Senator's head snapped up. "What? Where?" His eyes narrowed, and Freddy could almost hear him debating calling the police to report his son for imagined crimes.

"I stopped at the Cozy Up yesterday, and she was there. She had an interaction with a homeless man." Freddy skimmed the article. Reported missing by her parents last night when she missed a family dinner, found dead this morning, with similar wounds, not far from where Felicity was found. This time the spotters were a couple of young boys playing war in the Woods. His palm itched and he scratched it with his other hand.

"You need to contact that detective. Tell him what you know."

"I don't know anything. I simply saw her in the Village. I watched as she and a homeless man had an unpleasant exchange. I'm sure the barista at the shop will tell the police." Freddy met his father's glare, and rolled his eyes. "Fine, I'll call the detective."

Eventually.

The phone rang constantly. Marie, the housekeeper who had been with the family since just after Freddy's mother's death, maintained a neat list on a pad of paper next to the wall phone in the kitchen. Every few hours Marie would take the new list to the Senator in his study and he would choose which callers he wanted to contact. Always in control.

Freddy didn't know Marie well. He was sent back to military school the day after his mother's funeral. Prior to Marie, they'd had a number of different housekeepers, none of whom stayed very long. The fact that Marie was still here, ten years later, said something, but Freddy wasn't sure exactly what. She was a good housekeeper, friendly but not intrusive, efficient but not in the way.

Marie leaned against the kitchen island and sipped from her cup, blue cotton uniform neat and clean, a white apron hugging her round midsection. As far as he could tell, Marie wasn't warm to anyone, so Freddy didn't take it personally that she clearly had no interest in him. Freddy estimated she was in her fifties. Single, he guessed, or she would go home each night to a husband or children instead of upstairs to the three-room apartment over the garages. Alice, the housekeeper on the Brady Bunch, was part of the family. Marie was not part of the family, and Freddy thought that was as much her choice as the Senator's. Where did one find household help, anyway? Housekeepers R Us?

The Senator had retreated to his study, but Freddy remained in the breakfast room adjacent to the kitchen. Freddy shook the newspaper to correct an awkward fold and asked, "Have there been a lot of calls from Felicity's school friends?"

Marie wiped the counter and placed her coffee cup in the sink. "Quite a few callers, yes. I think the service will be well-attended. Felicity was a popular young woman."

Freddy noted her choice of words. Popular, rather than well-liked. Intentional? It was true, his sister was quite popular. No one would say she was well-liked. Cruel, yes. Manipulative, definitely. Narcissistic, to the core. The thing about Felicity, though, was that she was smart, and strategic. There was always a line, and she might walk up to it, tap her toe on it and smudge the line a little, but rarely would she step across it. She knew well when to show her hand, and when to wear the guise of typical beautiful girl with a bright future ahead. If she showed her true colors at the wrong time, to the wrong person, her cover would be blown. She had no interest in making a mistake that might change the future she had planned for herself. Control was the most important thing.

Felicity was, without question, a psychopath.

"Thank you for taking such good care of my father. I know he values and appreciates your service." Freddy smiled, and as always, it felt awkward, like he was wearing a mask. "Anything I can do to help prepare for Friday? As I said, I'll be heading into the Village if there's anything I can pick up."

Marie shook her head. "Thank you, but no. The market will be delivering Thursday, the caterer is coming Friday morning, the valet service will be here as soon as the church service starts, and everything will be ready for the wake by the time people begin coming to the house after the cemetery." She looked at him and smiled, but it was forced. "I included some of your favorite snacks on the shopping list, since you'll be staying. The Senator does not want to do a Christmas dinner, under the circumstances."

Freddy hadn't thought of that. A traditional holiday dinner would be ridiculous under the circumstances. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness. And it sounds like you have it well in hand. All right, then, I'm off to the Village. I'll be back before dinner."



HE DROVE AROUND THE Village, looking for the homeless man he now called "Red" in his head. The Village itself was only four blocks long by four blocks wide, so not many places to disappear. Freddy was pretty sure the mayor wouldn't put up with someone like Red loitering. He thought the vet probably came into the Village during the day to scrounge, then took himself off into one of the many wooded areas around town for the rest of his existence.

What had caused him to live like this? There were resources for veterans. Programs. Hospitals. Shelters. Freddy understood the impact of trauma, he lived with it every day, but he couldn't imagine choosing homelessness.

Freddy was deeply curious about people's motivations. His favorite college course so far was abnormal psychology. He'd almost decided to pursue psychology as his career, to help people, and take a deep dive into the fucked up minds of crazy people. Like Felicity. In the end he realized that probably wouldn't work out well, so he changed course and stuck with liberal arts.

When Freddy hadn't spotted the man by late morning, he decided it was time to address his growling stomach and popped into the Cozy Up. Besides coffee and tea, they also served sandwiches, although you weren't allowed to bring books into the café area unless you'd purchased them. No one wanted some stranger's tuna-stained fingerprints on the pages of their brand new book.

He chose his favorite table, facing the large picture windows at the front of the store, and Freddy took the seat looking out at the street. While he waited for his turkey on rye he eavesdropped on local gossip. Who would be prom queen? Who was getting a divorce? Which kid was the 11th grade dealer, and who was probably gay?

Freddy had not attended school locally after the 7th grade. He guessed his military academy was probably quite a different experience

from the Village's highly rated public school. Of course there were similarities. There were popular boys. Boys suffering from their family dramas. And there was most definitely a drug dealer. If there were gay students, Freddy was unaware. He was the only one accused of being a "fagot." Untrue, although he wouldn't have been bothered if he was.

Felicity's education was more traditional. She'd gone to the girl's prep school associated with the military school. From what Freddy gleaned, she attended dances, and played sports, and participated in a number of social activities.

More importantly, Felicity had been welcomed home on weekends. Freddy had not. He was barely allowed to return when school closed for winter holidays or summer vacations. He spent a lot of time alone on campus, and was grateful for it. Those were some of the best times of his life so far. Maybe he'd look for a position at a private boys' school after he graduated.

Just as Freddy finished his sandwich, he saw Red. Freddy tucked a \$20 under his empty plate and made his way outside.



RED HAD TWO SPEEDS: fast, and full stop. Between trash containers, he'd move quickly and with purpose, sending anyone who got in his way scattering, because he was not going to concede space. He wore the same clothes, which smelled far worse than Freddy had imagined, and carried the same tattered black backpack. This time he had a Hudson's shopping bag to collect recyclables. He stopped at each holiday-themed trash container and dug through, sometimes leaving litter on the ground if it got in his way. While Freddy casually followed from the opposite side of the street, Red rummaged through five containers and filled his bag with redeemable items.

Each time Red stopped, Freddy would pause and study the window of the nearest store. His interest was illusory, as he'd decided it would be

bad form to give the Senator a Christmas gift two days before his daughter's funeral.

Freddy was confident Red had not noticed him, did not notice anyone or anything other than to register if they were in his way or not. The man was in his own world. The Village streets weren't so busy that traffic would obstruct Freddy's vision, but eventually he crossed the street so they were on the same side of the same block. Red stopped, and Freddy found it important to ponder watches in the jeweler's window.

They were getting closer to the edge of downtown. Assuming Red was following a logical pattern, Freddy assumed he would eventually head towards the Woods. That's when things would get tricky. Freddy decided he'd better get the Volvo and position himself along the road that seemed most likely Red would take. That meant he'd have to walk past Red, and the sidewalk was narrow thanks to empty planters and flower beds under mounds of gray snow. Would Red remember him from the Cozy Up?

Freddy took a deep breath and hurried along the walk. Red was at a trash can, picking through and reviewing. He added two plastic water bottles to his bag as Freddy drew near. The two men looked at each other. Red's eyes were dark pools, seemingly without irises. They were what gave Red such a menacing glare. Red, for his part, was not interested in Freddy at all. There was none of the melodrama he'd displayed with Dead Ugg girl. Apparently if you let Red be, he'd let you be.

A clump of stringy red strands stuck to the shoulder of Red's barn jacket, along with speckles of white dandruff. Did he dare? At the last second, Freddy decided yes, and he held up a single finger as if he were doing a dust test on a shelf and plucked the strands from the brushed cotton. Red turned hard and stared at him, knowing something had happened, but unsure what. Freddy increased his speed and hustled away.



CHRISTMAS DAY CAME and went. The Senator hid in his study. Marie stayed in the kitchen. Freddy spent most of the day sprawled across the sofa in the family room, watching parades, tabloid TV and a soap or two. Marie had provided a virtual buffet of his favorite snacks – Funions, Little Debbie snack cakes, candy. Who needed turkey on such a day?

Between episodes of the General Hospital and *As the World Turns*, he napped, but his sleep was fitful. Nightmares flooded his mind with images. A Range Rover dead by the side of the road. Felicity waving him down, then furious when she realized who it was. Accusations, and screaming. So much screaming. Fury. Rage. Crying. A small sports car and a single black Ugg boot. A pink ski jacket stained with blood. The Woods. Dogs barking. Girls screaming. Boys shouting.

He woke with his fists clenching the tassels of a throw pillow that was soaked with sweat. All his life he'd had trouble with nightmares and terrors. During stressful periods, his overactive imagination was the devil, tormenting him, forcing him to try to separate reality from fantasy. He would dream in full cinematic Technicolor, complete with sound effects, and sometimes even final credits. It could be exhausting.

Freddy knew he should call the police station and left a message for the detective. He needed to get it over with. He wanted – no, needed – to go back to school, back to the place where the memories stayed away. Maybe tomorrow.



HOPE LUTHERAN WAS THE largest church in the Village, which was convenient, since it was overflowing. As Freddy had predicted, there was a large cohort of people in attendance strictly to score points with the Senator. Felicity's college sorority sisters arrived en masse, even though they'd all presumably graduated at least two years ago. Dark sunglasses implied teary eyes, although Freddy wondered if the sunglasses were to hide the fact that no tears were actually shed. The sisters were ac-

accompanied by a group of men, husbands or boyfriends, or just part of the social group from college.

The high school group was smaller. Mostly male. Freddy recognized a number of them, but no one seemed to remember him as they passed through the receiving line, offering condolences. Freddy was pleased to note most of them had lost the superior attitudes they'd carried with them in high school. Not a single one had actually gone into the military, apparently, although he supposed if they had, they might not have come back for this service.

Freddy had no idea whether Felicity had been seeing anyone 'special' during college or in the years after. If she was, it would be for show. There was only one love for her (besides herself) and he was the one who kept her in the style to which she'd grown accustomed. Felicity's paycheck as PR specialist for a local design firm could not have supported her brand new Range Rover, her beautifully decorated condo, or even her expansive wardrobe.

Freddy sat next to the Senator in the front pew, along with a few elderly relatives he barely remembered. Marie was at the very end of the row, included, but separate. Her black dress was nearly identical to the blue one she wore each day. Maybe Housekeepers R Us offered a full line of apparel appropriate for service...

There had been no visitation. The casket was closed, as no amount of funeral director magic could repair the damage to Felicity's face. A white pall was draped over the casket. After the hymns were sung, and the prayers delivered, then the readings, and the Lord's Prayer, the Senator delivered the only eulogy. It was appropriately heartfelt and tear-filled, delivered with a practiced politician's flare.

The Senator and Freddy joined four other pall bearers to carry Felicity to the vehicle that would take her to the cemetery.

When their car pulled up behind the hearse, the Senator and his siblings slipped out, but Freddy waited, enjoying the temporary solitude.

Some people chose to visit their loved ones after they've moved on. Freddy wasn't one of those. When his mother died, she was entombed at the family mausoleum, and that was the last time Freddy thought about the logistics of being dead. She was living, then she was not. She was at home, then she was at the cemetery. As far as he knew, neither his father nor his sister had visited on her birthdays or holidays or anniversaries. Freddy guessed that Felicity and the Senator thought of Elizabeth as an inconvenience that had conveniently resolved herself.

Today, for the first time in ten years, Freddy thought about the day his mother died.



THE SERVICE WAS RELATIVELY short, and then the long black car took them back to the house, where Marie had retreated immediately after the morning's service to prepare for their guests. The formal dining room had been set with a beautiful feast, the décor subdued in light of the occasion, but also offering a nod to the Christmas holiday that had just passed. Four bartenders served wine, beer, and mixed drinks. A few children broke free of the solemn occasion and played tag through the main floor, finding lots of places to hide in the various public rooms.

Freddy did his best to welcome and thank everyone who approached him, an appropriately sorrowful smile on his lips. The energy it was taking to pretend he would miss his sister was exhausting. He was counting the minutes until he could safely sneak out. He decided there were two groups of visitors: those who came to see and be seen, and then would leave; and those who considered themselves true friends. They were in it for the long haul, to enjoy the house, the company and the refreshments.

By four, he could not shake one more hand, or utter one more grateful word. He had something he needed to do, and now was the perfect time. No one would notice he'd gone, and if by chance they did, they'd think he'd taken himself somewhere quiet to mourn on his own.

With nearly fifty cars parked in the long drive and spilling out onto the road, no one noticed that the Senator's blue Lincoln was parked on the street, rather than in its usual spot in the four car garage. No one noticed when Freddy slipped upstairs and changed into brown wool trousers, a thick brown pullover, and a brown barn jacket. And no one noticed when he slid out the side door and used a garden path to get to his father's car.

He'd be back before anyone noticed he'd gone.



TWO HOURS LATER, EXHAUSTED and raw, Freddy found himself in the parking lot behind the high school, empty thanks to winter break. He jumped from the driver's seat and raced to the edge of the lot, scooped a hole in a mound of snow, and vomited. Again and again and again. Finally, he wiped his face with clean snow, and returned to the car.

He kept the engine running to avoid freezing to death. Dying might be the best idea, if he was honest. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes. He'd learned long ago it was better to lean into the deluge of ideas screaming through his mind, rather than try to resist. Allowing them to flow over him like a stream kept them from smashing into him over and over like waves hitting a breakwater – most of the time.

It was all too much. Mother, Felicity, the terrible things he imagined. The faces of the boys from school, now adults, mocked him. He closed his eyes and let the tide wash over him.



FREDDY WAS SMALL FOR a twelve-year-old, his frame slight, and not very tall. His father used the term "Petite" mockingly, not taking any ownership or acknowledging that his genetics contributed to his son's physical appearance. His features were sharp, his eyes dark and long-lashed, with high

cheekbones and voluptuous lips. It didn't take long for the older boys to call him names. "Flower" was a favorite, after the skunk in Bambi. "Sweetie". "Little girl." "Fredericka."

The names hurt, but he was able to retreat into his mind, into a world he built for himself – a fortress he built for himself. It was much harder to defend against the physical attacks, and those came quickly, and intensely, once they realized he wasn't fading away under the verbal taunts.

Razors in his boots. Swapping his uniform for one so large no belt could keep the trousers up, his hands drowning in too-long sleeves, demerits earned for sloppy attire even though it was obvious what had happened. Throwing his toothbrush in the toilet and then holding his head down into the bowl, forcing him to brush his teeth with the dirty toothbrush with toilet water.

Even those were somewhat manageable. Until. Until.

One January night after a dance at the school where his sister was a day student, a group of older boys – juniors and seniors, mostly – woke him, stripped him, dressed him in a girl's party dress, and sent him out onto the snowy campus grounds. He could still feel the scratchiness of the blue sequins of the strapless dress and the too-large high-heeled sandals that he immediately abandoned.

But that was only the opening salvo. He could still hear them counting to ten and then hunting him like an animal. He remembered running and sliding, barefoot, through six inches of fresh snow, his feet burning with cold, then going numb, in a dress that slapped around his skinny thighs, thin straps falling off his narrow shoulders so the dress slipped down. It was a constant struggle to retain the only piece of cover he had. No hat, nothing to protect him from the icy Michigan wind. Tripping on a buried tree branch, his skin wet, then frozen, finding a place to hide under a canopy of trees in the woods behind the dormitories – and then the crunch of their boots as they came closer, closer.

Smelling the booze and sweat and smoke on them as they burst into the cluster of trees, laughing and yelling, "Gotcha!" and then things went darker, much darker, as the boys, who were nearly men, being groomed in a

military environment to be leaders of industry and armies and maybe even countries, allowed their baser instincts to take over.

When he was finally able to hobble back to his room, barely able to walk, bleeding, swollen, torn, and frozen, one thing drove him. One sentence above all.

"Wonder if this is what Felicity meant when she told us to 'fuck him up'?"



HE CAME OUT OF A FOG, and realized he was crying, no, not crying, sobbing. He slammed his fist, over and over and over, onto his thigh, not caring that jolts of pain shot through his injured hand. It was time to go back to the safety of Michigan State, pack his things, and move on. It was time to leave Michigan behind, forever.

There had been a plan. He'd prepared the space. Made copious notes. He had a roadmap of sorts, to guide him in his efforts to correct the past. The plan was what kept him going the last few years.

By dying, Felicity had blown up his plan. There was no way to go back now, no way to undo the horrors he'd at her direction. Now, he'd never get the apology he so desperately craved. He'd never get the validation that was all he'd ever wanted from her. He'd never get the sisterly love he yearned for.

All because Felicity couldn't keep her damn mouth shut. She had destroyed him, yet again.

He had a future waiting for him in Wyoming. It was time to go.

Freddy left the Lincoln on the road, and walked back to the house. There was still a good sized crowd. He took the back stairs to his room, showered, changed, and sat on the edge of his bed.

The next day a third victim was found in the Woods. Freddy called the detective and told him about the incident with Red and the Ugg

girl. He said he'd seen Red head into the east entrance of the Woods and thought that was where he was living.

The following day the paper reported a man named Mark Halloway had been killed in a shootout with police at the edge of the Woods. They believed him to be the killer of three local women in recent weeks, thanks to a clue left by the final victim.

In her hand she had clutched strands of red hair.

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