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DAN NIMAK

Heartknocks

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Heartknocks

She died on her fourteenth birthday. At least, she thought she did.

Left...right...left...right.

Her steps were slow and careful. The ground was hard. “Must be a street,” she softly said, though the gray fog prevented her from seeing anything below the bottom of her nightgown.

Left...right.

Her foot tingled, and she knelt down to inspect. Dark green grass grew between the cobbled stones of the road. She jerked the blades that were wedged between her toes and tossed them aside.

As she stood, she noticed the flickering light in the distance that swayed ever so slightly in the cool breeze. “That’s pretty bright if I can see it through all this fog. Maybe it’s not far.” She began walking again and quickly added to her last thought. “I assume that’s where I’m *supposed* to go. Toward the light?” She took a deep breath. “Why not? Walk to the light, Kaili. Walk to the light.”

She thought of it. She felt inside her nightgown to see if it was still there. It was.

Left...right.

Something tickled. She immediately grabbed the back of her neck. She

took hold of it, and it stretched across her shoulders and down her back.

“Hair? Dang, Kaili. You’ve got hair.”

Her pace increased, and she continued to talk to herself – hoping it would give her some kind of comfort or calmness, anything to get her mind off the last thing she remembered before arriving here. “Wherever *here* is.”

Left...right.

The grass got thicker, and taller, and wilder. It slapped against her as her fast walk turned into a jog. Drops of perspiration fell from her face.

Stay calm, Kaili.

Maybe if I keep talking to myself.

“At least I’ve got hair again. I wonder –”

She shivered, her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the ground. She wrapped her arms around herself, too afraid to look. She knew that sound. The sound from behind. The sound of someone knocking on a door.

It can't be. Not here. Not now.

She released the tight grip of herself and rolled over to her hands and knees. “I must have imagined it.” Kaili slowly turned her head.

The fog had lifted.

Behind her, there was no door.

No bedroom.

No home.

No Mom and Dad.

No Logan.

And there was no knocking – including the special knock only Logan used, the knocking sound she thought she had heard moments ago, the last sound she *knew* she had heard just before she died.

She took another deep breath and slowly exhaled.

And then, their secret signal rang out again.

Knock.

Knock-knock.

Knock-knock-knock.

Kaili jumped up...and ran to the light.

The flame inside the glass danced as the lantern swung from the pole on which it hung. On tiptoes, Kaili reached for the lamp, but her fingertips fell just short of touching its bottom. “I guess I don’t need it that bad.” She grasped the lamppost and swung herself around – “Crap! What is that?”

On the other side of the post, three fist-sized buttons faintly glimmered in the night. Each button contained a word. Kaili read the words from top to bottom. “EARLY. LATER. NOW.”

She plopped down and leaned against the post, her head resting just below the bottom button. She knew what she was supposed to do, but she didn’t know which button to push.

“Why can’t there just be *heaven* and *hell* buttons?”

She closed her eyes and listened for a sound, a clue; but, she opened them quickly – afraid of what else she might hear.

Kaili pulled herself up. “I can’t sit here all night. I know I’m not choosing the ‘NOW’ button, and I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t care much for the ‘EARLY’ one either.”

She raised her arm and stared at her shaking hand.

Once again, she thought of it. One hand rubbed inside her nightgown.

Her other hand slammed the middle button.

* * *

“Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Kaili. Happy birthday to you.”

Kaili smiled, took a deep breath, and blew out all eleven candles.

The best part of the party occurred after the cake and ice cream: presents. And Mom and Dad got her what she had hoped for.

“Sorry I don’t have a gift for you,” said Logan. “But thanks for inviting me.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Kaili replied. “You just moved to our block a few days ago, and I didn’t actually invite you until this morning. I’m glad you could come.”

“Well, thanks again.”

Kaili grinned. “You can always get me a gift later.”

“I’ll work on that.”

She grabbed his arm before he walked out the door. “I’m just kidding.”

Kaili slept well that night.

~ ~ ~

The note had been slipped under her bedroom door, early on the morning of her twelfth birthday. Kaili knew it had to be from him. She jumped out of bed, grabbed the note, and read.

Meet me at The Pill’s for your birthday present. Don’t walk. You’ll need your bike.

The Pill’s wasn’t really its name, or at least, it probably wasn’t. The old restaurant at the edge of town had been falling down for years. Only part of its sign was still readable: the word *Grill*, and the two letters before it. It might’ve been *Bill’s Grill* or *Mel’s Grill*, but Logan had named it *Pill’s Grill*. For some reason, he liked that name. And ever since then, he and Kaili had simply called it *The Pill’s*.

On the short bike ride to *The Pill’s*, Kaili thought about the last twelve months. In a word, they had been wonderful. She looked forward to each and every day. And there was one reason for that. Her new best friend...

“Who is nowhere around,” she said as she pulled up to the rickety building. She was a little concerned as she got off her bike, but her worried expression changed to a smile when she saw the taped note flapping on the rotted window sill to the right of the front door.

“iRde ot hte oPts iceOff. What the heck does that mean?”

Kaili studied the note further. “Ride!” she exclaimed. “I think I got it. Ride to the Post Office. I can do that!”

No note, however, was attached to anything outside the post office. But she knew how friendly their small-town Postmaster, Mr. Clair, was, so she went inside to test her theory. She dialed the combination to the lock on her box and slowly pulled it open. She peered inside and giggled at the small surprise.

“I was right,” she said. “But there’s no Chinese restaurant in this town.”

Kaili grabbed the fortune cookie, cracked it open, and read the note. “Hungry?” She laughed. “Actually, I’m kind of craving Chinese all of a sudden, but that’s probably not the answer.”

Back on her bike, she rode to her and Logan’s favorite place to eat, Pop’s Pizza.

Pop was actually a middle-aged woman named Becky, but she could make pizza like nobody’s business. And today, maybe known by Becky – but maybe not – a piece of paper was being held in place by the windshield wiper of Becky’s car.

“Are you ever gonna get here?” read Kaili. She turned the note over. “Your final clue: 2166.” She thought for a moment. “I know we don’t have any street numbers that high. 2166? What is – I’ve got it!” She jumped on her bike and headed for the edge of town.

Not the edge of town by *The Pill’s*. She had already been there. But the

other side of town had the same sign, the city limit sign, the sign that announced the population of their town, the sign on which Logan leaned against when she arrived.

He sang alone. "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Kaili. Happy birthday to you."

"Depending on what you're hiding behind your back, this might just be the best birthday ever."

Logan brought one hand out from behind his back. Part of a slip of paper stuck out between two knuckles of his clenched fist.

Kaili pulled it out and read. "Stealth."

Logan smiled.

"That's it?" she asked. "*Stealth*? It means sneaky, doesn't it?"

"Maybe..."

"It's summer, Logan. I don't feel like an English exam."

"Me neither," he said. "But do you feel like going somewhere...where we're not exactly supposed to go?"

She grinned as she punched him on the shoulder. "Have me back by dinner?"

"Maybe..."

They rode about three miles outside of town, stopping next to a thick growth of shrubbery. "We'll hide our bikes under the bushes," said Logan, "and walk the rest of the way."

Kaili had a good idea where they were going. “That’s where the stealth part comes in.”

“We don’t want anyone seeing us go to the caves. But it’s not far. Hide your bike, and I’ll grab the rope I left under the bushes last night.”

She had never been to the caves, and it wasn’t just because of the warning signs posted outside. It was the tales of danger that had diminished her interest. But she was younger then. At age twelve, all of a sudden it seemed a little more exciting. Or maybe Logan was the difference.

“Do you think the stories are true?” she asked as they approached the entrance.

Logan pointed to the three signs. “The warnings on the signs? Or the waterfall?”

“Both.”

“I guess we’ll soon find out.”

As they walked past the ‘Keep Out’ sign, Logan tapped it with his fist.

Knock.

He tapped the ‘No Trespassing’ sign twice.

Knock-knock.

Then, the last sign.

Knock-knock-knock.

He knelt down and began tying the rope around the bottom of the third sign. “I sure hope this holds.”

“Our lives on a rope tied to a sign that says *Danger*. What could go wrong?”

Logan laughed. “Happy birthday.”

“You know, I think my parents would be a little upset if you killed me on my birthday.”

Logan stretched out the rope and walked a few steps toward the hole in the ground. He pulled the rope tight, flung the loose portion of it down the hole, and smiled. “I’ll have you home for dinner.”

Kaili peered down the hole. “It looks lighter down there than I thought it would. But...it’s also a little farther than...than I...”

“It’s only about ten feet or so. And the knots I tied in the rope will help. Do you want to go first?”

Kaili wavered between acting brave or smart. “I guess you can.”

“Great.” Logan took his shoes and socks off and dropped them down the hole. “It’ll help your feet grip the knots better.” He lay flat on his stomach and grabbed the top knot on the rope as he slowly edged himself down feet-first.

Kaili held the top portion of the rope tightly as Logan lowered himself. “As if this would actually help any,” she whispered.

When he reached the bottom, he hollered up to Kaili. “Come on down!”

She didn’t want Logan to think she was afraid. Fortunately, seeing how easily he made it down gave her some confidence. She sent her sandals down and grabbed the rope.

“You got this!” said Logan.

The knots he had tied worked perfectly, for both her feet and her hands. She could feel she was almost down. Her insides were doing happy backflips. On the outside, she couldn’t contain her smile – especially when Logan took hold of her ankle.

“Is getting up going to be the hard part?” Kaili asked as she jumped the last foot to the ground.

“You can go first and tell me.”

“We’ll see. Do you think there really *is* a waterfall somewhere?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“And it looks like there’s only *one* way for us to go.”

The light from outside showed that they stood inside a cave with a single narrow tunnel branching off to their right. The tunnel was barely taller than they were.

Logan extended his hand. “After you, birthday girl.”

“Yeah, right. You’re such the gentleman.”

Without too much hesitation, Kaili led the way. Each step took them farther down and brought less light. She counted the steps in her head. It became narrower and steeper. After twenty steps, she stretched out her arms and her hands touched the sides of the walls. By forty steps, it was completely dark.

“Are you *sure* we keep going?”

“We have to. It’s your birthday.”

After seventy steps, the walls closed in so much they had to scoot sideways.

“You brought the WD-40, right?”

“In my back pocket.”

And on the eighty-fourth step, it happened.

“Do you hear that?” Kaili excitedly asked.

“Water!”

A few steps later it became brighter and wider. Kaili stopped counting and ran to the light.

Logan arrived a few steps after she had entered the chamber, which was at least the size of her entire house. High above, light filtered in from cracks in the rock ceiling. It wasn't intense, but it was bright enough to display the most beautiful site she had ever seen.

Water poured over the back wall, freely cascading to the floor and splashing into a large basin made by nature. A rainbow of colors glistened inside the bowl as the water gently overflowed its container and transformed into a multitude of tiny rivers, seeking one of the many small cracks in the floor.

Logan pointed to the left side of the basin, opposite of where the water spilled over. “Chairs!”

She hadn't even noticed the two small rock outcroppings that resembled small, flat chairs. She screamed with excitement and ran to a seat. She kicked her sandals off, stretched out her feet and dipped them in the pool. “Whoa!

That's pretty cold for July."

Logan sat in the chair beside her. He placed his hand inside the water and shook it.

"Are you getting a drink?" she asked.

"Not after your feet have been in there."

"My feet are clean. You know, there seems to be a lot more water going *into* this bowl than going out."

Logan sat on his knees and leaned over the water. "It looks like there's a hole in the bottom over there." He walked to the other side, sat down, and reached toward the bottom corner of the basin. "Yep," he said with most of his arm under water, "it's about as big as my fist."

"Logan?"

"Yeah."

"If you get stuck..."

"Yes..."

"You're on your own."

"That's sweet of you."

"It's my birthday."

Logan walked back and sat beside Kaili. He stretched out his arms, pointed to the top of the waterfall with both hands, and smiled at her. "Happy birthday, Kaili."

She almost cried. "Thanks, Logan. It's the best gift ever."

“I wanted to get you something special after last year, when I didn’t have a gift. You told me –”

“I told you that you could get me a gift later. I didn’t mean it, you know. But I’m so glad you did. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re making it really hard for me to come up with a good enough present for your thirteenth birthday.”

“You’ve got three months to think about it.”

Random splashes of water sprinkled on them. Kaili kicked her feet in the water, leaned back on her hands and looked around. “Hey! Do you see that little hole in the wall?” She stood up and walked to a part of the wall several feet away from the waterfall. “It looks like a little bird’s nest.” On tiptoes, she reached for the spot, but it was beyond her grasp.

Logan walked over, and his extra couple of inches of height allowed him to reach inside and scoop out a mixture of small pebbles and dirt. “No magic treasure,” he said. “Not even bird eggs.”

They sat down and talked about the past year, their plans for the rest of summer, and the upcoming school year.

“Do we tell others about this place?” Kaili asked.

“I’d kind of like to keep it our secret.”

She smiled. “This is certainly going into my diary tonight.”

“You have a diary?”

“From my grandmother. She gave me a diary not long before she died about four years ago. I loved her so much.”

“It’s good that you have it.”

“It’s really big. I love writing in it.”

“And tonight...you’re going to write about *me*.”

Kaili hoped her face wasn’t red. “You wish.” She quickly changed the subject. “We need to name this cave.”

“Simple. *Logan’s Cave*.”

“I don’t think so. You named *The Pill’s*.”

“I guess that’s a good point. So, what are you going to name it?”

“You had the right idea, but obviously, the wrong name. And use the letter *K* twice: *Kaili’s Kave*.”

Logan laughed. “That works.”

“I’ve got a question.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Where in the world...” She tried to look serious before she completed her question. “Did you get a fortune cookie?”

“It helps if you plan ahead,” he quickly replied.

She thought for a moment, and then she knew. Logan had been acting very confident all through this cave adventure, even a little cocky. And he had asked her to lead the way through the tunnel. He was too nice to do that if...

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you?”

Logan smiled. "Maybe..."

Kaili slept well that night.

She slept well again...and again...until...

Until a few months before her thirteenth birthday.

~ ~ ~

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Kaili. Happy birthday to you."

She tried hard not to cry on her thirteenth birthday. It might be her last birthday, and everyone there knew it. They would understand if she cried, but she still didn't want to.

She didn't really want the cake, or the ice cream, or the presents. She didn't want to see the look in her parents' eyes. Not today.

She understood her parents' worries, and she loved them more than anything in the world. She truly hurt for them more than herself.

She appreciated all of her family and friends coming to celebrate her birthday, but she didn't feel like celebrating. Not today.

Kaili didn't feel like blowing out candles either.

But she closed her eyes and took a deep breath...and...she held it. She chewed on her bottom lip. She shut her eyes even tighter. And tighter. Finally, she exhaled, opened her eyes, took another breath...and blew out all thirteen candles.

Everyone clapped, and Kaili asked her mom and dad if she could be

excused. She thanked everyone and apologized as she and Logan left the house.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“We need some rope.”

Again, Logan knocked once, twice, then three times on the three warning signs next to the cave. He tied the rope around the *Danger* sign, and they escaped below to *Kaili’s Kave*.

The water tasted good. She made Logan taste it too – *before* she put her feet in it.

They sat in their chairs and talked about their last couple of visits to the cave. They didn’t say much else, but the sounds of the waterfall soothed Kaili.

“I bet you can reach the bird’s nest now,” Logan finally said.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“You’ve grown since you were just a little twelve-year-old girl.”

She chuckled.

“Come on,” he insisted. “Try it.”

“Logan, I don’t really –”

“Come on. Please! For me?”

“If you’ll stop being weird,” she said as she stood and walked away from the waterfall. She still had to tiptoe, but her hand reached the little hole in the wall. “What’s this?” She pulled it out and could no longer hold back her tears.

Logan jumped up and ran to her. “I’m sorry, Kaili. I didn’t mean to make

you cry.” He placed his hands on her shoulders, and she threw her head into his chest and sobbed.

Not just because of her birthday, or because of her parents, or because of her thoughts about death, or because of Logan, and not just because of the silver ring she had pulled from the bird’s nest.

But for all of these things, she cried.

When her tears subsided, she and Logan walked back to the waterfall. As she sat down, she made a promise to herself that she would never cry again. She placed the ring on her finger. “Thank you so much for this. It’s beautiful.”

“I’m sorry if you’re not really in the mood for a gift. But it’s something I wanted you to have. The stone is a ruby.”

“My birthstone. I love it.”

“Can I ask you something, Kaili?”

She nodded.

“When you blew out your candles...what’d you wish for?”

She didn’t answer.

That night, she didn’t sleep well.

Nor for many nights at all over the next several months.

~ ~ ~

“Halfy birthday to you. Halfy birthday to you. Halfy birthday dear Kaili. Halfy birthday to you.”

Her bedroom door rattled.

Knock.

Knock-knock.

Knock-knock-knock.

“Come in, Logan. And, what’s up with the *halfy* birthday?”

“You are *exactly* thirteen and one-half years old today,” he said as he entered the room...carrying a rope.

She laughed. “Can I get dressed first?”

“Sure. Brush your teeth too if you want. I’ll wait downstairs.”

It was rare lately that she felt well enough to do something even slightly strenuous, but it was a good day. For the time of year, the weather was warm. In a light jacket, she was comfortable outside, and pedaling her bike again felt amazing.

She climbed down the rope without much trouble at all, though she did breathe a little heavier when she reached the bottom. Logan held her hand as they walked through the tunnel. She didn’t know if he was trying to be supportive, or if he just wanted to hold her hand. The reason didn’t matter; she squeezed his hand.

As they sat next to the waterfall, it crossed her mind that this could be her last time here. She didn’t cry. It was a good day.

It was too cold to consider dipping feet in the water, but Logan sat on the ground and dipped his hand in for a taste. “Wow, it’s never tasted better.”

“Really?” she asked. “It isn’t too cold?”

“Maybe that’s why it’s so good today. It tastes colder, or fresher, or something. You want to try? I’ll cup my hands together and bring you some.”

“Thanks, but I don’t mind getting my own.” Kaili knelt beside the edge of the basin and leaned over. As she cupped her right hand and reached for the water, her left hand, which she was leaning on, slipped. She fell hard. Fortunately, her right hand and arm took most of the blow from the stone at the bottom of the basin, which kept her head from hitting it.

Logan quickly helped her to her feet and out of the cold water. Kaili wiped her face. Her hand hurt badly, and she rubbed it. “I think I may have sprained my – No! Logan!”

“What?”

“My ruby!”

The ring was on her finger, but the ruby had been knocked out.

Logan jumped back in the water. In one quick motion, he threw his jacket to the side and dropped to his knees. He took off his shirt and dove for the hole in the back corner. Kaili screamed his name.

He scooted on his hands and knees for at least ten minutes searching for the gem.

“It’s okay, Logan. Please, get out. *Please*. It’s okay.”

With his shirt stopping the water’s main exit, the floor where Kaili stood began to turn into a tub. The water almost reached the top of her shoes, and it was rising. He trembled as he looked at her. “I’m sorry, Kaili.” He jerked his

shirt out of the hole and climbed out of the bowl. The water outside immediately began to recede.

He thanked Kaili for having placed his jacket on one of the chairs. He put it back on without a shirt underneath and sat down. The combination of his wet jeans and the rock chair made a *squishing* sound.

“You’ve got to be freezing,” Kaili said.

“I guess I could wear the jacket as pants instead of a shirt. But I think I’ve got enough of a problem explaining to your parents why I’m not wearing a shirt.”

She needed the laugh.

“I *am* a little cold, though,” he said. “How about you?”

“I think it’s time we find a little more sunshine.”

“But first…” Logan pointed to the little hole in the wall. “Check out your bird’s nest.”

“Logan. Seriously? I hope you didn’t get me anything. It’s just a *halfy* birthday.”

“But it’s *thirteen* and a half. That’s a big deal.”

She reached for the bird’s nest and pulled out a silver necklace with a small ruby pendant. It was obviously something that matched her ring, at least until a few moments ago. “It’s gorgeous. Thank you so much.”

His voice was sad. “You’re welcome.” He looked into the basin.

“It’s okay, Logan.”

“I’ll get you a new ring – this week! I can –”

“No –”

“But I want to.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Understand what?” he asked.

Kaili unfastened her new necklace. She pulled the ring off her finger and threaded the silver chain through the ring, letting it hang with the ruby pendant. She handed the ends of the chain to Logan and turned her back to him. He lifted the necklace over her head and fastened it for her.

Kaili turned around and faced Logan. She grasped the bottom of her necklace and took hold of her ring. She held the ring up to Logan and looked deeply into his eyes. “*This! This* is the ring that is special to me. Not a new one. *This* one is special, and I want to keep it. It stays here.” She let it drop under her shirt. “Close to my heart.”

Logan didn’t say a word, but he smiled.

Climbing up the rope was much more difficult than going down. Kaili worried that she might not make it, but as she reached for the ground at the top of the hole, Logan clutched her hand and helped her out.

She knew there was no way she could ride a bicycle the three miles back to town. As she rode on the handlebars, Logan continuously apologized, but Kaili responded by only thanking him and laughing about the day they’d had.

Once they made it back to town, Kaili wanted to walk – which she did, as Logan pushed the bike.

The walk home was nice, and he asked her a question that he had asked before. “Will you tell me what you wished for on your *real* birthday?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“You closed your eyes for a really long time.”

“I didn’t want to tell you then. I thought it might make me cry.”

“You don’t have to tell me now either.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind telling you now – but first...”

“What?”

“I know something you want to know. So, it’s only fair...”

“Why does that make me a little nervous?” he asked.

Kaili pressed her hand against his chest to stop him from walking. She smiled. “What’s up with your knock-knock-knocking calling card?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. The knock, knock-knock, knock-knock-knock thing. It’s cute and all, and I know it’s you. But does it have any special meaning? Did your grandfather knock on Granma’s head or something as a sign of affection?”

Logan laughed. “I guess I could tell you. But I’m not sure that my little secret might be more valuable than yours.”

She knew he was kidding. “I’ll tell you first.”

“Okay, deal.”

Her playful mood quickly changed, and she wondered if she should’ve just let it go when she had the chance.

No, I can do this.

“It was more of a prayer than a wish,” she said.

“Oh, I guess I know what you prayed for, then.”

“No, it wasn’t *what* I prayed for. It was *who* I prayed for.” Kaili instinctively felt for her ring from the outside of her shirt and squeezed it. “I prayed for Mom and Dad. And I prayed for you, Logan.”

Logan looked into the distance and wiped his eyes.

“Is that good enough for you to tell me your secret?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s more than good enough.”

Logan placed his hand on Kaili’s shoulder. He leaned toward her and whispered into her ear.

Kaili didn’t respond. Not at first. And when she did, she stuttered. “Th... th...thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

It was a good day.

* * *

“Well, crap.”

Kaili shook her head as if there were cobwebs or something that needed to

be removed. She felt inside her nightgown and stared at the lamppost, which now had only two buttons: EARLY and NOW.

She assumed she needed to push another button and tried to reason things out. “The ‘LATER’ button wasn’t exactly what I expected. Maybe it just meant the later part of my life.”

Kaili carefully looked around. She saw no one and heard nothing.

“I’m still not feeling so cozy about the ‘NOW’ button, so I guess I only have one option.” She placed her hand on the top button. “I wonder how early ‘EARLY’ is. I may wake up in my crib.”

She pressed the button.

* * *

She was in her favorite place in the whole wide world.

There was nothing better than curling up in Grandmother’s lap. Mom told her that they came to see Grandmother often, but it didn’t seem often enough to her.

“Will you read me a story, Grandmother?”

“I would love to. What would you like to hear?”

She pointed to her favorite book, which lay on the table beside her.

Grandmother smiled as she picked up her diary. “How about a story from when I was about eleven years old?”

Kaili wriggled so she could get a little more comfortable. She told

Grandmother that she was ready, and Grandmother began to read.

Mother and Father finally said I could have a new dog, so we went to pick out a puppy today. I was so excited.

We drove past the Millers' house and then in about ten more miles we made it to the farm where a mother dog had six puppies. The names of the owners were Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, and they told us the puppies were about nine weeks old. They said the mom was a border collie and the dad was part border collie, but he had some other kind of dog in him too.

The puppies were so cute.

There were four boys and two girls. They were all black and white, except one of the girls had some brown in her.

They were all playful, and they ran after me when I ran.

But then I noticed that one of them limped or something.

When I sat down, they all wanted in my lap, and it was then when I saw that the one who had a limp only had three legs.

“Only three legs, Grandmother?”

Grandmother nodded.

I asked Mr. Anderson what happened, and he said that the puppy's leg must have got wrapped around the cord when it was born. But he said that the puppy never knew he was supposed to have four legs, and that he could run and play as good as the rest of them.

I felt sorry for this puppy, but he did look as happy as all of his brothers

and sisters. He even seemed to like me a lot. A whole lot. When I ran away and fell down and rolled around the grass, he was the first one to come running to me and lick my face.

I got to play with all of the dogs for maybe ten or fifteen minutes while Mother and Father visited with the Andersons. Finally, Father asked me which dog I wanted.

I told him I wanted the one with three legs.

And guess what?

He is sitting on my bed right now beside me.

His name is Trey. Father said we should name him that since he only had three legs. I think that is a funny name but also a perfect name.

I already love him.

“Did you like that story?”

“A whole lot, Grandmother. But why did you pick the dog who was missing a leg?”

*Grandmother closed her diary. She softly caressed Kaili’s hair. “Because,” she said, “I knew *that* dog was special, and I wanted to keep him.”*

Kaili snuggled deeply into her grandmother’s lap. “And you and your special dog lived happily ever after.”

“Yes, sweetie. Trey and I definitely had a lot of wonderful years together. And speaking of special, I have a little gift for you today.”

Kaili released her hug and sat up straight. “For me? But it’s not my

birthday. I won't be eight until July."

"I know, but can't a Grandmother give a special gift to her sweetie just because she loves her?"

"I love you too, Grandmother."

Grandmother set her diary down and pulled a book out from under the table. "Guess what this is?"

"Another one of your books, but it's a lot bigger."

"It is a book, but it's not mine."

The seven-year-old smiled. "It's for me!"

"Yes, sweetie. It's your own diary." Grandmother handed it to her, and Kaili's eyes lit up. "Now, you can write your own stories. And maybe one day, you will be as lucky as me and have someone special to share them with."

* * *

With her hand holding the ring inside her nightgown, Kaili stared at the lamppost. There was no button. "I guess it's now or never," she said. "I wonder what would've happened if I had pushed the 'NOW' button first."

"Maybe nothing," said the voice behind her.

Kaili abruptly turned around.

"But then again," said the lady, "maybe a small electrical charge would've run through your body."

The lady looked to be someone's grandmother, in spite of the fact that she

had long braided hair. Most grandmothers Kaili knew wouldn't consider long hair, much less braids. But the twisted dark hair, with only a glimpse of gray, looked very nice on this lady.

The lady smiled, and Kaili relaxed, assuming the lady had been kidding about the shock therapy punishment for pressing the wrong button.

She walked to Kaili, sat down beside the lamppost, and patted the spot on the ground next to her.

Kaili sat beside her and asked what her name was.

"I'm Jazz," said the lady.

"Sweet name."

"Thank you. My father wanted to name me Jumpin' Jazz and call me J.J."

"I assume your mother objected."

"They flipped a coin."

"Thank God for *heads*, huh?"

Jazz laughed. "How are you feeling, Kaili?"

"Even weirder since you know my name."

"I also have a feeling that you might want to talk about something."

"Wow – where to start? So, it's *now*, now? I'm not seven, or eleven, or twelve, or thirteen?"

Jazz nodded. "It is *now*, except that *now* has been temporarily suspended."

"Okay, you may have to go slow for me," said Kaili. She then touched Jazz on her shoulder, both to emphasize her next question, and to make sure that

Jazz was real. “Am I dead? I died in my bed this morning, right?”

“No, Kaili. You’re not dead. At least...not yet.”

“What do you mean?” Suddenly, the stress and confusion of whatever all of this was – birthdays, buttons, dying, reliving life’s memories – was too much.

“Are you even real?” she shouted. “Is this a dream?”

“I am real, and you are *not* dreaming.”

Kaili covered her face with her hands and lowered her head.

“There’s a reason you’re here. I promise. Please trust me.”

Kaili lowered her hands and stared at Jazz. She felt like giving up, but she also wanted help. “You’re here for a reason too, then.”

“Yes,” said Jazz.

“What is it?”

“We need to talk...about Logan.”

Kaili’s entire body stiffened. “What about Logan?”

“For starters, care to explain that knocking thing?”

Kaili grinned, and a peculiar feeling somehow comforted her. “It means ‘I love you’ – and why do I think you already know that?”

Jazz didn’t reply, and Kaili continued. “Logan whispered it to me. It took me by surprise a little bit. I was thrilled, but all I could do was mumble back a thank you. He told me I was welcome, probably just so I wouldn’t feel so awkward.”

Jazz smiled. “Three knocks...for *I love you*?”

“Later, I asked Logan about that. One knock for *I*.”

“And three knocks for *Y...O...U*,” said Jazz. “But why *two* knocks for love?”

“He said that meant two halves of a heart.”

Jazz smiled again. “Did you tell him that you loved him too?”

Kaili shuddered. “No, I didn’t.”

“Do you?”

Kaili took a deep breath before she spoke. “Logan is my best friend,” she softly said. “I saw him every day. When I got sick, he did so much for me. When I lost my hair, he shaved his head. When I was puking out my guts, he held me. And lately, when it hurt too much to even open my eyes, he read to me.” Kaili looked up at the lamp. “Yeah, Jazz. I love him. But no, I never actually told him.”

“Why not?”

“I think it’s because I wanted to protect him.”

“How so?”

“I’m *dying*, Jazz. Isn’t that hard enough on him?”

Jazz nodded. “When did Logan first tell you that he loved you?”

Through her nightgown, Kaili felt for her ring. “It was the day he gave me my necklace...the same day I lost the ruby from my ring. I guess you could say I had a *bittersweet* day.”

“May I see your ring?”

Kaili pulled the necklace out and grasped the ring to show – “The ruby! Jazz! The ruby...it’s back!”

“Do I have your attention, Kaili?”

Kaili nodded as she let the necklace freely fall back inside her nightgown. “Please tell me something.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Why am I here?”

“For one, simple reason. You are being given an opportunity.”

“An opportunity to do what?”

“I think you know.”

Kaili did know. “But won’t it make it worse? Won’t Logan get over me easier if I don’t tell him?”

“Has this little trip here not shown you anything? There are very few *truly* special people and moments in our lives. The way we respond is so very important.”

“I get that, but still...”

“Ask yourself two questions. Does Logan deserve to know? And, if you and Logan could trade places, what would you want to hear from him?”

Kaili had no choice but to break the promise she had made to herself exactly one year ago. But the tears were for Logan, not her.

Jazz took hold of Kaili’s hand.

“Do I go back home from here?” asked Kaili. “How long do I have?”

“Yes, and not long. Logan will be the last person you see in this life.”

She stopped crying.

Somehow, from somewhere, Kaili was ready. But first, she needed to make sure of one thing. “I’ll have time to tell Logan that I love him?”

Jazz nodded. “You will, sweetie.”

Jazz squeezed Kaili’s hand and released it. She then reached up and touched the lamppost.

* * *

Kaili clutched the worn diary under her pillow as she turned over in bed.

I want him to have my necklace too.

She took it off and wrapped it around her diary, making sure that both the ruby pendant – and the ruby on the ring – were proudly displayed on the front cover.

Kaili held the diary close to her heart.

She closed her eyes, and a strange feeling came over her.

Knock.

Knock-knock.

Knock-knock-knock.

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