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Prologue

January 2011. Sophie is eighteen years old.

As Sophie opened the front door, I was hit by a blast of frigid air. She picked up the three white plastic garbage bags she had hastily stuffed with her clothes and makeup, her toothbrush thrown in as an afterthought. She turned to look at me, her hazel eyes dancing with excitement. And then my daughter walked out of my life.

I watched as she descended the steps, her ponytail bouncing to the rhythm of her stride. Slipping on a small patch of ice, she steadied herself as she advanced toward the waiting car. In the moonlit darkness, I barely made out the car's driver, her latest can't-live-without-him boy, the twenty-one-year-old heroin addict she'd met just weeks ago in the psychiatric hospital. The tip of his cigarette glowed as he moved it to his mouth and then away. The smell of rancid tobacco from her clothes lingered. As the car pulled away, its one working headlight cast a shadow on the snow-covered driveway and its muffler scraped the pavement. Shivering, I closed the door.

The antique clock my husband Josh's great-grandfather had handcrafted chimed eight times, its mellow peal signaling Sophie's departure. The odor from the fish I'd fried for dinner still hung in the air. While I wished she would change her mind and reverse the few steps she had taken, I knew she would not. This was, after all, the child who made one frightful decision after the next and never looked back. No, once Sophie set her mind to something, there was no turning back.

I glanced at the abstract image of the colorful neuron we had hung proudly on our dining room wall. Sophie had painted it for her senior art project just months ago. Her art teacher insisted it was good enough to be displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Not only was Sophie a talented artist, she also was lauded as an up-and-coming actress and the poetry she wrote was exquisite.

Sophie's dog Dunkin shot back his big ears. He barked as he raced from the living room window to the dining room window and then back again, trying to alert me to the dangers awaiting her, beseeching me to stop her, to make her come home. Travis, our black Lab, took his cue from Dunkin and added his raspy yelp to the ruckus. As the car drove down the street, Dunkin howled.

Josh's soft tenor continued explaining the complexities of an algebra problem to our son Aaron. I sank into the blue leather sofa in the dimly lit living room, feeling hollow and bereft. Travis rested his head in my lap. My body shook uncontrollably as I sobbed into his thick black fur. I hadn't experienced this mix of abandonment, fear, and sadness since my mother's suicide nearly thirty-six years ago.

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