



Unbreakable

by Alessa

-- For Sarah --

"Answer the damn door, Kevin!" I shouted at my younger brother, who was making a sandwich in the kitchen, while someone repeatedly knocked on our house door.

"Why do I have to do things around here all the time? He retorted, "Why can't you get off your butt and be useful for once?"

"I'm playing the game, and I don't want to die this close to the end. Just open the door, or I'll tell Mom the password to your porn stash."

"Fine," he grumbled. "As if you would."

There was a shuffling in the hall, followed by some muttering of voices for a minute or two, and then the doors closed again. A mailman, most likely, delivering stupid junk for Kevin's stupid bike. And to think I should answer the door and pick it up for him. Not a chance.

"Who was it?" I enquired without looking at him once he returned to the living room. But he just stood there, silent, looking at me as if he'd seen a ghost. "Kevin? Open your mouth. Make some sound come out of it."

"Lis... It was the police."

I shot him the what-have-you-done-now look. "Did you steal something? Did you get into a fight again?" I tried to think of what else sixteen-year-old dorks like him could be guilty of. "Mom's gonna be so pissed off when she gets home."

"Catherine's been released," he mumbled. "They just wanted us to know."

It was now my turn to morph into a ghost. I felt blood draining from my face. It can't be. Catherine? My hands shook, and the console dropped to the floor at my feet. The screen in front of me flashed that I have died. Again. For the hundredth time, I was dead again.



"Melissa? Is everything alright?" Mom entered my room, where I was lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. There was a sprinkling of glitter in one corner of the ceiling, a leftover from my thirteenth birthday party that has never been cleaned off. That was ten years ago. The last happy memory I could remember.

"I'm going to see her," I said. I was calm now. I was determined. But I knew it wouldn't last.

"Let's just think it over. There's no need to rush into anything right now. It's been ten years..."

"Ten years since they locked her up. For what?" I glared at her.

"We've been through this before, Melissa. She deserved what she got. Besides, she's probably not in any mood to face you after what she's been through."

"How would you know, Mom? You weren't there, remember?" My eyes misted, and the only way I knew how to fight tears was to get angry. But there was no one to get angry at. This wasn't my fault or Mom's fault. Not even the dork's fault this time.

"You don't even know where she's staying," Mom tried to rationalise.

"I know where her house is. Her father still lives there. Where else is she supposed to go?"

"Alright, and then what? Do you really think you have the power to change the past? You'll only get hurt again, and I won't let that happen." Her hand was stroking my shoulder. "Keep in mind everything we've been through, Melissa. Nobody needs that in their lives again."

"I- I just need to see her, Mom. That's all. I want to talk to her. I want to hear her talk. But it's not as if you ever understood any of that."

"You should leave her in the past. Present-day realities seldom match long-ago memories. Besides, you have your studies to focus on. Don't ruin everything because of Catherine."

"What was there to be ruined, had been ruined a long time ago." I turned away from her and reached for a pillow. I couldn't believe how everything came crashing down around me in a single afternoon.

"Melissa, I know everything that happened with Catherine has been painful for you," she sighed. "But going back there isn't going to make anything better. I believe your Dad would have agreed with me on this."

"Please, Mom, don't bring Dad into this."

Mom stood up from the bedside where I was lying. I could hear her approaching the bedroom door. "At least think about it for a few days before doing anything rash," she advised, opening the door. "Catherine is just a name from a long time ago; a different era, a different reality. You must learn to let things go."

But letting things go meant letting Catherine go. Neither my Mom nor anyone else asked me if I could let her go all those years ago. No one cared. To do the same now would bring that horrible pain back into my life again. And I wasn't prepared to do that. I was no longer a thirteen-year-old girl being

bossed and ordered around by well-meaning adults until they got what they wanted. This time, it was different.



I didn't go to see her that day. I took Mom's advice and thought about Catherine and her situation for a few days. What would be the right thing to do? Would she want to see me? Or would it only cause more unnecessary trouble? Did Catherine deserve what happened to her—losing her career and wasting the next ten years in state prison, only to pass the remainder of her life hiding at home in shameful disgrace?

Was there any point in looking up an old friend to offer her sympathies and compassion after all these years? Was I suffering through post-trauma guilt like they told me I would, and feeling beaten after ten years of no resolution? Was I pursuing a fool's journey of misguided nostalgia and misplaced sentimentality?

Or did I owe something to Catherine and the time we spent together—the time I still remember like it was yesterday? Could I rediscover in myself vestiges of forgiveness and compassion that had been purged from my being by the so-called social workers once the scandal hit the news? Even if Catherine slammed the door in my face, at least I would know that I tried and showed sympathy, even if it was refused.

A few days later, I found myself driving to the Denison's home that I had known so well as a middle schooler. Mr. Denison was kind, friendly, hospitable, and welcoming whenever I visited, and I remembered his kindness all these years later.

When Mr. Denison answered the door in response to me ringing the bell, I was surprised at how little ten years could change a person. If he had passed me in the street, I'm sure I would have recognised him immediately as Catherine's dad.

He was only in his mid-sixties, but he looked active and healthy, although his memory was probably not as sharp as it used to be.

Recovering from my initial reaction of uncertainty and indecision, I smiled, happy to see him again. "Hello, Mr. Denison," I said warmly.

It took him a moment to recognise me and remember my name. "Oh my, Melissa, is that you?" he said, proud of himself for remembering.

"It's nice to see you again," I said.

"Catherine doesn't get many visitors these days," Mr. Denison said. "She's out back pruning the garden. She's been back only since last Monday."

"Is it okay if I go say hi to her?" I asked with concern.

"Only one way to find out, sweetheart," Mr. Denison answered with sadness in his eyes, gesturing for me to walk around the side of the house.

I nodded as he closed the door and anxiously walked around the corner of the house to the backyard, where the garden was located.

Their garden was one of my favourite places. It was the only place I felt truly safe with Catherine, where we were at peace, free, and hidden from the rest of the world.

Catherine had pruned a large pile of twigs and leaves around the trunk of one of the trees, and she didn't notice me until I was about ten feet away. When she eventually looked up from her focused task, she was visibly shaken to see me standing there.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Visiting a friend," I tried to remain calm, despite the fact that my heart was in my throat.

"Is that what we are, Melissa?" Her tone made me flinch. But she had a point. What exactly did we mean to each other? Calling her a friend sounded fake, like an excuse for something that could not be expressed. But if not friends, then what were we? She was no longer a teacher, and I wasn't her pupil. And we certainly were no longer lovers. We were two souls thrust into this agony of remembering who we used to be. We were a memory trapped in amber and stored in the files of a district court judge for all eternity.

"I wish I had an answer," I struggled. "It wasn't easy on me, either."

"I'm sorry," she said, looking at the dead leaves at her feet. "It feels so long ago now."

"I still remember everything as if it were yesterday," I reflected, a sting of regret in my throat. "And you still look the same, even after all this time." Catherine didn't look all that bad for someone who had been through an ordeal. She was about thirty-five now, and her hair was still black, and her bronze eyes were still tired, as if forever seeking answers to her pain. She was wearing a grey sweatshirt and an old pair of jeans, but her figure was as resilient as ever.

"You've grown since the last time I saw you," she observed.

"It happens," I smiled, suddenly feeling shy. "You're still taller than me, though."

"How are your parents doing? Your brother?"

"Mom is doing fine, despite worrying too much. She still works at the hospital. And brother's in high school now. He's still a dork, though," then I faltered. "My dad died two years ago. Heart failure."

"I'm sorry about your Dad."

"I miss him every day," I admitted. "Your Dad is doing quite well. He recognised me immediately."

"He keeps active with gardening and fixing things around the house," she explained, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

"It will be easier for him with you back home."

Catherine nodded with understanding and leaned the rake against the tree trunk. "Why don't we sit?" she suggested.

I followed her to the bench her Dad had built into the trunks of two trees on the opposite side of the garden. I remembered doing my homework with her on that bench more than once, and it felt right to be sitting on it again.

"What do you do these days? I remember how you always wanted to be an archaeologist. Like Indiana Jones," Catherine recalled.

"I'm in the last year of University," I updated her. "I'm studying law."

She scanned my face as if my choice didn't sit right with her. "Any particular reason for the change of heart?"

"What happened to us," I felt the familiar rage stirring in my chest. "I want to make a difference, or at least try, however small."

"I admire your optimism," she sighed. "Any boyfriends?"

"You know me better than that, Catherine." I noticed her flinch for a second before composure set back in. "There was a girl in my first year of Uni," I continued. "But it didn't work out. There is no one else right now. I'm too busy studying, and then there are activities..."

"Activities? Do you still paint?" she asked with genuine interest. "You were really good."

"Only occasionally, and it's really not that good. I have yet to sell a single painting."

Catherine didn't say anything, and we sat together quietly for a long moment.

"How are you doing, now that you're back?" I finally asked.

She laughed because otherwise she'd cry. "The universe is paying me my dues," she remarked.

"Maybe it will get better," I encouraged.

"It can hardly get any worse."

"It can't," I admitted. "Will you look for work?"

"Perhaps something part-time, anything I can get," her voice wavered. "I'm not allowed near schools, so teaching career is over for me."

I nodded again. She was one of the best English teachers at my school.

"It was nice of you to stop by," Catherine remarked with appreciation. "People generally don't want to know about me. My old friends avoid me. And I stay to myself. We have groceries delivered. I only go out if there is no other option."

"People will forget with time."

"People *never* forget," Catherine assured me.

"Will *you* be able to forget?" I asked.

"I don't know, Melissa," she admitted. "Once a convict, you never stop looking over your shoulder. I'm on probation for another three years. I'll never be able to shake it."

"Everybody deserves a second chance," I said.

She stood from the bench. "Thanks for stopping by, Melissa," she said. "It means a lot. I should get back to raking the leaves."

"Do you want me to help?"

"Dad will finish the job," she said. "I just do this to keep myself occupied. If I sit around too much, I start remembering, and that's not always a good thing."

"Can I stop by again?"

"Why would you want to do that?" she frowned.

"I sense you could use the company," I answered.

Catherine gave me a long stare. "If you want," she finally said quietly.

I nodded and smiled. "I'm glad you're back." I left the yard with a wave.



It's been rather quiet around the house since I visited Catherine. The dork stopped complaining about any random thing that popped into his head, and Mom's been moping around as if someone had drowned her kittens.

But on the positive side, there were no longer any disagreements. I kept to myself, wrote my assignments on time, and attended lectures. I felt relieved and content knowing that, at least, Catherine was alive and well, and still young enough to make something of her life. However, despite my newly discovered optimism, I was aware that there were still unresolved questions from our past and suppressed memories that lingered in the recesses of our minds.

Catherine was surprised when I showed up on her doorstep a few days after my initial visit.

"I figured I'd never see you again," she admitted as she stood in the doorway.

"Why?" I asked, somewhat hurt by her words.

"Because I'm kryptonite," she answered. "Plus, I'm a middle-aged spinster living with her father. Who wants to be around that?"

"Can I come in?" I asked.

Catherine gave me a suspicious look. "Why are you here, Melissa?"

"You said I could come back," I reminded her.

"I wasn't serious," she sheepishly admitted.

"Please?" I said gently.

"Dad's sleeping," Catherine said. "He does a lot of that lately."

"Why don't we sit out here then?" I suggested, gesturing to the porch chairs on the warm October afternoon.

Catherine hesitated for a moment. "Let me get my sweater," she said, closing the door.

I sat down on one of the porch chairs while waiting for her, remembering the times we used to eat cookies and drink lemonade here on warm summer afternoons.

Catherine returned after a few moments and sat in the chair next to me, wrapping the sweater around her even though it wasn't cool at all.

"My Dad suffers through an illness too," she sighed. "He may look healthy, but he has heart problems. Mom had cancer before she passed away. I didn't think I'd have to go through that again. He's not that old."

"It's good that you're here with him," I said.

"I'm probably better off not dragging anyone else through that with me," she said. "Having lost all my friends and reputation."

"I suppose I was lucky that my father died suddenly and unexpectedly," I remarked. "He left the house, telling me to make sure I take the dog out for a walk, and he never came back."

"That's *not* being lucky," Catherine replied.

We sat on a familiar bench in the warm sunlight. Then she sighed and shook her head in disappointment or regret. "I've ruined everything, including your happiness and my future. You didn't deserve any of that spectacle that came later."

"It only hurt in the beginning," I said. "Most people were unsure of what to say or how to act, so they said nothing at all. In a room full of well-wishers, I felt completely alone," I remembered.

"Grief is a lonely thing, Melissa."

"Returning to school felt awkward," I cringed at the memory. "Eventually, I gave up on trying to make friends. Even now, everyone goes on with their lives while our world has ended," I said, looking at her face. "I was too embarrassed to seek sympathy and support. I wouldn't talk about it, even with my Mom, until much later."

"I'm sorry about what I did. If I could change..."

"No, don't say that, Catherine," I cut her off. "I would not change it for anything in this world."

Neither said anything for a good five minutes. We sat watching the occasional car pass on the street in front of us.

"I'm used to the silence," Catherine said. "But it's nice to have someone to be silent with."

I nodded, but I didn't say anything.

"Some of my favourite time with you was sitting like this, just listening to the sound of birds and wind in the branches."

"We should go to the movies sometime," I said out of the blue.

She looked at me as if I was crazy. "I can't show my face in public," she said.

"We can go out of town."

She shook her head. "No, I can't leave my Dad. Besides, you really don't want to be around me, Melissa," she warned. "Not only am I a convicted sex offender and on parole, but I'm also suffering from mood swings because of my pathetic fall from grace."

"Taking control of your life would make it easier to face each new day, I suggested.

She let out a sigh but didn't say anything.

"There are no easy answers," I remarked. "There is no 'how-to' book for either of us to get through any of this."

"I know, Mimi," Catherine replied, using her old pet name for me. "How is Samantha doing these days?"

Samantha was my closest friend in school, but she moved away after graduation. "Her father found a new job in another city," I explained. "They relocated, and I lost contact with her after she graduated."

"Did Samantha know about us?" she asked unexpectedly. "You two were always sharing secrets as if they were candy."

"She did," I admitted. "But she never told anyone."

I can still clearly recall the day I told Sam about me and Catherine. She'd been bugging me for days about why I always went to Catherine's home after school, and my repeated answers that I helped her carry books and that she helped me with school projects only made her more suspicious. I knew then I had to tell her the truth, if only because she was growing distrustful of me, and I didn't want to lie to my best friend and lose her friendship as a result. So I told her about wanting to be close to Catherine, our secret hugs, how much I liked her, and how much she liked me back. I told her about our first kiss and the times we secretly went to the park and beach. Later, I told her about spending evenings in Catherine's bed, naked under the linen bed sheets on warm summer nights before I had to return home, and how happy she made me feel. It was probably the first time I saw Samantha scared. But she never said anything to anyone.

"Do you have any friends now?" Catherine's voice brought me back from reminiscing about our past.

"Not many, but they are good friends, someone I can talk to about anything."

There was a crisp ring of a bicycle bell somewhere on the sidewalk, and the voices of school kids returning from school. The memory of those days was still vivid in my mind.

"When the Twin Towers collapsed a while back, I realised that's exactly how I've been feeling," Catherine finally said. "Overwhelmed with shock, anger, sadness, and guilt about everything. It feels like the dark times."

"It would've been tough for anyone," I said. "You don't have to be alone in this grief; there are support groups and people willing to help," I suggested. "You don't have to go it alone."

"Yes, I do," Catherine replied. "I can't face people after what I did. I'm surprised I'm talking to you now," her voice shook. "Melissa," she turned to face me and gave me a cold, disdainful look I couldn't discern. "Do you remember what you said about me at the hearing before the judge? It still hurts me to this day. It wasn't the girl I knew and loved."

Her words hit me harder than I dared to admit. "Of course I remember," I whispered. It was etched in my mind forever. I was a witness against the only person I loved with all my heart. But as much as I loved her, they left me no other choice but to spit venom at her on that dreadful day.

"Everything was planned and prearranged. It felt like I was auditioning, learning my lines, and repeating them when my turn came." I think my hands were shaking. "Catherine, that wasn't what *I* wanted to say. I was given the choice to say what they wanted me to say or face years of therapy and brainwashing. I resisted as hard as I could, but thirteen-year-olds are no match for that kind of coercion. I hadn't slept for weeks. I'd cried my eyes out every single day. By the time they were done with me, I had nothing left in me to fight with."

"I understand, Mimi," she placed her hand on mine. "But at the time, it hurt me more than the sentence itself. I didn't want to live with that memory for the rest of my life."

"I always thought you would understand that the girl you saw and heard that day wasn't the *real* me. That you'd still turn things around, make them see what I saw, make them understand... do something to make it stop," I recalled my distress at the time.

"Perhaps I'm not as strong as I wanted to be," her hands fell into her lap.

"Do you remember the day I left for summer vacation with my family? You promised me you'd wait until I returned. Imagine there is an invisible string between us, you said. No matter how far or how long we were apart, the string would always keep us together."

I turned to her and saw her eyes searching my face. "I loved you more than life itself," she said.

"I know," a familiar shiver went through my body. But I also knew it wasn't right for me to feel this way. Things were different between us now, and I desperately wanted to block the memory of our past. Maybe my Mom was right after all. I had no business resurfacing all this pain back to the surface. Catherine is only a name from a long time ago—a different era, a different reality.

"Do you still play the piano?" I tried to move away from the uncomfortable past.

"Not very often," Catherine admitted.

"You should give it a try," I said. "I bet your Dad would love to hear it."

"The piano is hopelessly out of tune," Catherine replied as she stood. "I should really be in there in case Dad wakes up," she said impatiently. "Thanks for stopping by, Melissa. I appreciate your concern."

I stood too. "I'll be back," I told her.

"You don't have to."

"I want to."

She seemed exasperated by my persistence. "This is not a good idea, Melissa," Catherine warned.

"Why don't you let me worry about what's best for me?" I replied.

She shook her head with disapproval and turned away before I could see tears in her eyes; then she disappeared into the house.

I questioned whether all these warning shots fired my way about staying away from her was the universe speaking to me, but my father's words before he died kept flashing through my mind—there is nothing wrong with following your heart.



I returned to the Denison's house a few days later with a van pulling to the curb behind me.

"Thanks for coming," I told the burly, overweight guy as he climbed out of the driver's seat of the van and grabbed a tool box from the back.

The man walked with me to the front door of the Denison house, and I rang the doorbell. A few minutes later, Mr. Denison opened the door, seemingly out of breath.

"Hello, Mr. Denison!" I said cheerfully. "We're here to tune the piano."

The man's face lit up.

"Is Catherine home?" I asked.

"What are you doing?" It was Catherine appearing behind her Dad.

"Tuning your piano," I announced. "This is Jim Harris," I gestured to the piano tuner. "Best in the business."

"Oh, that would be lovely," Mr. Denison said with excitement. "I do miss Cathy playing the piano."

Catherine gave me a death stare from behind her Dad, but then forced a smile as she stepped in front of him.

"Why don't you come in?" she said with fake sincerity.

"The piano is in here, Mr. Harris," Mr. Denison said happily as he led Jim into the living room. But before I could step in, Catherine cut in front of me to prevent me from following them.

"I didn't ask you to do this," she growled.

"You heard your father," I said reassuringly. "He'd love to hear you play."

"Who says *I* want to play?"

"It will be good for you," I declared.

"You have no right to involve yourself in this, Melissa."

"Don't you think it will be nice to bring some cheerfulness back into this house?"

Catherine didn't say anything as she stepped into the living room, where Jim was already at work on the strings, with the piano back upright against the wall. Mr. Denison was sitting in his easy chair, looking very happy as he cheerfully chatted with the piano tuner.

"Do you think you remember, dear?" Mr. Denison asked his daughter.

"It's like riding a bicycle," I answered for her.

"All the music books are still in the bench," Mr. Denison said.

Catherine stayed mostly quiet as her Dad chatted it up with Jim Harris and me. Somewhat too late, I realised I had offended Catherine with my hasty effort to cheer her up, but I hoped she'd get over it once the piano was restored to playing condition. The smile on her father's face the first time she touches the keys would be enough to forgive my transgression.

When Jim was satisfied that the piano was properly tuned, he packed up his equipment while Mr. Denison thanked him for his service. Jim headed for the door first, and Catherine trailed behind me, grabbing me by the arm at the door to make sure Jim was out of earshot.

"*Don't* come back, Melissa," she said adamantly.

"All I want to do is *help* you," I said defensively.

"I don't need or want your help," she snapped. "And I don't appreciate you presuming you know what is best for me. So do me a favour and stay out of my life."

"I'm sorry if I offended you, but I'm the only friend you have these days, Catherine," I said with dejection in my voice.

"I *don't* want your friendship," she said. "Just leave me alone."

"Misery is a choice, Catherine," I told her. "Be a martyr if you must, but the only one you're hurting is yourself and maybe your Dad."

"Leave, Melissa," she said angrily, pushing me out the door and slamming it behind me.

I paid Jim Harris for the tuning as we stood at the curb, and then I drove home, wondering why she had gotten so upset at what I thought was a positive gesture of support and kindness. But after enduring months of post-trauma therapy as a teen, I realised that there was no use in attempting to convey to others what one feels in their own heart when explanation was neither requested nor desired.

So I left Catherine alone and resumed my life as a lonely 23-year-old student. To say our lives have been affected by what had happened to us would be an understatement.

All I could do now was remember the happy memories and push the sad ones away. As pitiful as it sounded, I knew I had enough wonderful memories with Catherine to blunt the ache and loss for the rest of my life. And yet, as I made my way back home, I was painfully aware that Mom had been correct all along—it was a fool's errand to think I could walk back into Catherine's life after so much time and damage.



Mackridge University is a small campus consisting of 19th-century brick buildings separated by secluded gardens, water fountains, and trees with name plates pinned on them because some were older than the buildings themselves.

By the main entrance gate, under the shade of cypress and chestnut trees, was the most impressive of those gardens, where a family of ducks occasionally paddled in a small, artificial lake. The floral beds brought colour to the green canopy of trees in spring and summer, while chirping sparrows and finches chased one another in the branches.

It was early one afternoon when I made my way past the garden, and as always, I turned my head to admire the flowers, anemone being my favourite. The spring weather was mild and pleasant, and I relished the sun glimmering on my face after a long winter spent mostly indoors. Amidst this splendour, standing beside the main gate, I saw Catherine looking in my direction.

Six months have passed since she asked me to stay away from her, six months since I last saw her, and now she was here, dressed in old jeans and a grey cardigan, with a book in her hands.

"How did you even know where to look for me?" I asked.

"I didn't," she offered a smile. "I was hoping this would be the right place to find you. I was prepared to wait for you every day until you turned up."

"But you know where I live," I shifted textbooks in my arms. "You could've..."

"No, I couldn't, Melissa," she looked around to see if someone might be overhearing us. "Your mother... I don't want to upset her with my presence."

"You're probably right," I agreed. "It's nice to see you, Catherine."

"I know this is unexpected, but I was hoping we could talk."

I was suddenly aware of the stifled anxiety in her voice. "We could sit in the park. There are benches, and thankfully, the weather is nice."

We walked in silence to the little lake. There were water lilies floating on its turquoise surface, but no ducks this time.

"I come here sometimes to look at the flowers and eat my lunch, but only if it's not too cold," I told her.

"I wanted to apologise about the last time," she looked me in the eyes.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I replied.

"I was rude to you," Catherine insisted. "I took my anger and self-hate out on you, and that was wrong of me."

"It's okay," I smiled. "You've had it rough. I'm really sorry about what happened to you."

"Melissa, if anyone should be apologising, it should be me," her voice was choked with sadness. "Do you forgive me, Melissa?"

I looked at her in disbelief. "No," I shook my head. "How can I forgive you when there is nothing to forgive, Catherine?"

"You have suffered just as much as I did, if not more."

"But you were never the cause of my suffering." A couple strolling along the lake passed us by, their hands around each other. "Do you remember the day when I came to you in class after everyone had already left? We were alone, and I finally found the confidence to confess to you. I emptied my heart to you, and you fought hard to say no to me because you knew where it would lead to. But twelve-year-old girls are stubborn creatures. I was not going to give up, was I?"

"You were always strong-minded, Mimi."

"What I'm trying to say is, I hold as much blame for what happened as you do. I was never taken advantage of, and you know it as well as I do, Catherine."

"You were twelve. How could you've had been responsible for anything?"

"The same way I was responsible for doing my homework or feeding my pet hamster."

Catherine laughed, something that I haven't heard for a very long time. "It's not the same thing, Mimi," she said.

"Perhaps, but you get the idea. I knew what I wanted."

Silence returned between us, and my gaze wandered off to the tranquil water of the little pond and the dragon flies hovering over the vibrant water lilies floating on its surface. One time, while we were at a park similar to this one, Catherine said how much she wished for us to live together one day when I grow up. But to a 7th grader, it felt like a lifetime away.

"Do you remember our first kiss?" I asked her and felt my cheeks glowing.

A small smile flashed across her face. "Seriously? How could I forget something like that?"

It was the dead of winter. Snow had fallen the night before, and I was shivering from the cold while waiting outside the school in an ambush for Catherine to emerge. As soon as she stepped outside, a hail of snowballs pelted her coat, scattering their icy powder all over her. The surprised look on her face made me laugh as I ran away to hide behind her car, where she finally caught up with me. 'Miss Roberts, you're in so much trouble' she pretended to look serious, but there was a betraying little smile on her lips. We were in the school parking lot after everyone else had already left. With my back to the car, she bent lower to my height and gazed at my face. That was the first time I saw what love looks like in someone's eyes. Nobody was laughing anymore, and I stopped breathing when her lips touched mine.

"You looked like a little Eskimo that day," she recalled. "All bundled up in a jacket, scarf, mittens, and a beanie. Only your little face showed, and those beautiful big eyes looking at me. Your lips were icy cold, by the way," she said. "I had to bring you home and warm you with hot chocolate."

I turned to her with a smile, only to see her eyes well up with tears. Her hands wrapped around my neck.

"God, I've missed you so much, Melissa," she wept, and then it hit me that I'd never seen her cry before.

We were embracing on the bench in the leafy oasis of the University park as I brushed my fingers through her hair. This time, as Catherine sobbed into my neck, it was my turn to make her warm and safe. When she was finally able to pull herself together, she broke the hug and leaned against the bench with a spent sigh.

"Maybe it's for the better that they ended it all," she declared.

"How can you say that?" I asked incredulously.

"You had to go your own way, Melissa. I would only have held you back; it wouldn't be right."

"I missed you too, you know?" It bugged me that she still thought I was somehow damaged by what happened between us. "No one has the right to destroy love between two people. What we've lost will never come back."

Catherine didn't say anything, but I could tell she was thinking about that cursed day when all hell broke loose and our world came crashing down around us.

It was a Friday, and her class was where I spent my last period. Because I wasn't going to see her over the weekend, I waited for my classmates to leave until it was only me and Catherine in the classroom.

She had previously warned me not to do that. It's dangerous, she said. People could see us. But I wouldn't have had it any other way. I wanted to say goodbye with a kiss before we parted for the weekend, and I wasn't taking no for an answer.

She sighed when she saw me waiting for her, but I also saw a gentle smile on her lips that was reserved only for me.

"I told you we can't, Mimi. Why won't you listen to me?"

"Just this once," I implored her, knowing full well that I would ask her again the following Friday.

She sighed once again, her eyes mournful, and her hands folded over her chest. "Come here, sweetheart," she finally gave in and scooped me into her arms for a quick peck on the lips. And that was all there was to it. That was all it took for our love to be murdered in the name of justice, because behind us, standing at the classroom door, was the history teacher, Ms. Westmore.

"Uh... perhaps I should come in later," she cleared her throat and walked away.

The expression on Catherine's face was that of horror, and even I could understand that this would be the last time I saw her, and that somehow it was all my fault.

The rest is a nightmare I don't care to remember.

The sun was near the horizon when her hand reached for mine and clasped it in my lap. "You were right, of course," she said after a while.

"About what?" I asked, looking curiously at her.

"The piano. Dad loves listening to me play."

"You remembered how?"

"Like riding a bicycle," she said with a sad smile. "So, anyway, I wanted to thank you for that gift. And I thought I'd bring you one in return," she opened the book she carried with her and took out a photograph. "Do you remember that day?"

I looked at the photograph in her hand, and the memory swept over me like a tidal wave.

"Of course!" I beamed with joy.

I'll always remember that day. The thrill of excitement. The joy of happiness. I even remembered the lie I told my parents. Samantha and I were meant to go for a bike ride and ice cream. Instead, I sneaked out with Catherine to the local fairground. There used to be a giant Ferris wheel, and we made a beeline for it. On a warm spring day, very much like the one today, there were many people queuing outside, but we were able to secure a cabin of our own. I was grinning and jumping with delight as we ascended higher and higher. Deep below us, people were moving around like ants, and in the distance, the city skyline glimmered in the sun. It was early evening, and the sun was beginning to set just as we reached

the highest point. With an explosion of orange hues in the background, our arms around each other, and smiles on our faces, we decided to snap a selfie.

The same photograph now lay in my hands.

"This is the only memory I have left after the police ransacked my home that day. They somehow missed it. I want you to have it."

"I hope you have a copy for yourself," I said. "If not, I'll make one for you."

"I would love that very much," she smiled.

"Do you want to go somewhere for a drink or anything?" I asked.

She shook her head no. "It's getting late. I should get going."

"Thank you for coming here today and waiting for me." It was her new self-confidence that encouraged her to come all this way just to see me, and I wanted her to know it. "I wish things had played out differently for us."

"You are right," Catherine admitted. "But whatever pain I had to endure was worth that fleeting moment in time when I could love you and be close to you. It almost seems like a dream now."

"The pain is over, but love doesn't have to end, Catherine," I leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"I will always be that fairy-tale monster in their eyes, no matter what I do with my life," her lip trembled. "I should probably just disappear forever."

"Please don't," I said, taking her hand in mine.

"The funny thing is," Catherine revealed, "I would do it all over again. I never intended to fall in love with you, but after you opened your heart to me, I just couldn't ignore you and push you away. You were a beautiful girl, Mimi. You still are."

"There is nothing wrong with following your heart," I echoed my Dad. "You don't have to justify yourself to anyone. After losing everything, you have the right to live your life as you choose. You have atoned for your so-called sins. Now you get your second chance," I paused for a moment. "We get our second chance."

Catherine looked at me with amazement. "Melissa, why would you want to go out with someone like me?"

"For the same reason I came to you that day in the classroom and asked you if I could hold your hand." I stood from the bench and offered her my hand. "And because I'm still game for a movie if you are."

She fell into me, tears rolling down her cheeks. "But it's a good cry," she told me when she was able to collect herself. "Tears of happiness, gratitude, relief, and hope. Of letting go and moving on," she conceded after a few quiet moments. "I'm not going to hide out any longer if you're there with me."

"I'll always be there for you, Catherine," I said, and led her out of the park hand in hand.

As the last of the sun's dying rays tickled my eyes, I blinked and realised Catherine's words had never been more accurate than now.

Imagine there is a string between us, she said. No matter how far or how long we are apart, the string will always keep us together.

Because the string between two hearts doesn't forget or waver.

It doesn't let down or surrender.

It is invisible. Endurable.

Unbreakable.

The End