

DEADLY LITTLE LESSONS

I slice myself a thick hunk of clay and wedge it out against my board, focusing on Sasha—on the photos I saw, the articles I read, and a couple of YouTube videos that she was in (a Lady Macbeth monologue and a clip from the musical *Grease*). After several minutes, once again, a *t* pops into my head, but this time in more detail. I close my eyes to concentrate, and I see that it's black, with sharp edges, and about six inches long.

I start to sculpt it, at first thinking that I'm wasting my time by replicating a piece I've already made, but then I hear the girl's crying again: the soft whimper I heard at Knead. As I continue to sculpt, the crying gets louder and more distinct, and it almost sounds like she has the hiccups. I keep working, running my fingers over the *t*, perfecting the borders, and making the corners more defined. But soon the crying is too much to bear. And suddenly I find that I'm crying, too.

After a couple of deep breaths and a few final touches, I decide that the piece looks pretty finished. But now a new image surfaces in my mind, and I feel like I have to sculpt it, too.

I smooth out a slab of clay, and then I grab a scalpel to cut petals out of it—eight of them—as well as a disk. I put them all together, forming a stemless daisy.

My tears drip onto the sculpture. The crying in my head is so loud that I can't hear anything else. I drop the scalpel, but it makes no noise. I bump my work board, but there's no sound as it hits the table.

"Please," I whisper, but I can't hear my own voice. The crying sound is too loud, too big, too overpowering. I take a step back and pull my hands from my work.

After several moments, the crying seems to dissipate, becoming a slight whimper inside my head. I wipe my hands on a rag and cover the clues with a tarp.

Then I hear something else. A whisper. A word. I can't tell for sure, but I think she just called out, "Mom." The possibility of that—that she might be trying to communicate through me—compels me to go upstairs. I hurry into my room, check the computer screen for Mrs. Beckerman's contact info, and grab my phone. With trembling fingers, I block my number and dial hers.

Mrs. Beckerman picks up right away; I recognize her voice from TV and from her video. “Hello?” she repeats. “Is someone there?”

My mind is racing; I have no idea what to say, or if I should simply hang up. “Is this Tracey Beckerman?” I ask, playing for time, all out of breath.

“Yes. Who’s *this*?”

“I can’t really tell you who I am, but I have reason to believe that your daughter Sasha is still alive.” *At least, I think she is. At least I think it’s her voice I heard crying, and that I still hear crying now.*

“Who is this?” she demands again.

“Is there a plus sign?” I ask. “Or a *t* shape, or something with the letter *t* that might be a clue to her disappearance?”

“Excuse me?”

“Does Sasha like daisies?” I ask, aware of how little sense I’m making.

But it must make sense, because the other end of the lines goes church silent.

“Hello?” I ask, still able to hear the distant crying inside my head. I close my eyes and cover my free ear, trying to block it out.

“Please, tell me who this is,” she says.

“Is there a special daisy, or a daisy charm . . . ? Were daisies her favorite flower?” I continue.

“Do you know where my daughter is?” Her voice quavers.

“No. I’m sorry.” My voice is shaking, too. “But I believe she’s still alive. I mean, I can’t say for sure, but—”

“Where is she?” she snaps. “Have you seen her? Did you call the police? Is there something that I need to know?”

“I don’t . . . I mean, I’m not—”

“Is it money you want?”

My heart hammers and my mouth turns dry. “No. I mean, I’m just . . .”

“Can I speak with her?” she continues. “Can you please just tell me if she’s okay?”

I’m tempted to hang up, but now I feel like I’m involved—like I’ve almost made things worse.

“Tell me!” she shouts.

My mouth trembles. I'm at a loss for words.

"Camelia?" Dad asks, sneaking up behind me.

Startled, I turn off the phone, wondering what he heard, and hoping that Mrs. Beckerman didn't hear my name.

"What is it?" he asks, studying my face: the tears running down my cheeks, the blanching of my skin, the redness of my eyes.

"I have to go away for a while," I tell him.

He glances at the phone, probably wondering what just happened. I'm wondering the very same thing.

"For a few weeks," I say, correcting myself. "I want to do a summer art program. Spencer says it'll help get me into college. I've already done the research."

"Where?" he asks, somewhat taken aback.

"At Sumner College," I tell him. "In Peachtree, Rhode Island."

LESSON NUMBER ONE: NEVER GO WITH STRANGERS

He slides a tape recorder toward my feet, through the hole in the wall—the wall that separates him from me. I'm confined underground, in the dark, in a cell made of cinder blocks and steel. The hole—just big enough to fit both of my hands through—is the only visible opening in the cell. There are no doors, no windows.

"Where's the trash?" he barks. His voice makes me shiver all over. He sets his lantern down on the ground; I hear the familiar clunk against the dirt floor. The lantern's beam lights up his feet: work boots, soiled at the toe, laces that have been double-knotted. "I shouldn't have to ask for it every time."

Time. How long *has* it been? Two weeks? Two months? Was I unconscious for more than a day? He took my wristwatch—the purple one with the extra-long strap that wound around my wrist like a bracelet. My father gave it to me for my fifteenth birthday, just before I found out the truth. And now I may never see my father again. The thought of that is too big to hold in; a whimper escapes from my mouth. Tears run down my cheeks. I hate myself for being here. I hate even more the fact that I probably deserve it.

I lean forward, pushing my plastic bowl through the hole, eager to appease him. Hours earlier, he'd filled the bowl with stale crackers and had given me a lukewarm cup of tea. My stomach grumbles for a hot meal, though the thought of eating one makes me sick.

He snatches the bowl and then pushes the tape recorder a little further inside. As he does so, I catch another glimpse of the mark on his hand, on the front of his wrist. I think it might be a tattoo.

"What is this for?" I ask, referring to the tape recorder. Aside from the clothes on my back, my only current possessions are those he's given me: a flashlight, a blanket and pillow, a roll of toilet paper, a basin of water, and a cat litter box. If it weren't for the flashlight, I'd be totally in darkness. I shine my flashlight over the recorder; it's the old-fashioned kind.

He feeds a microphone through the hole. There's a cord attached to the handle. "Only speak when spoken to," he reminds me. "Now, be a good girl and plug the mic into the recorder," he continues.

With jittery fingers, I do what he says, fumbling as I try to plug the cable into the hole at the side, finally succeeding on the fifth try.

"I want you to record yourself," he says. "Tell me what you love and what you hate. What scares you the most."

"What scares me?" More tears drip down my cheeks. *I'm scared that I'll never get out of here. I'm scared that I'll never get to see my parents again, and that I'll have to pay for what I did.*

I move my flashlight beam up the wall. Unlike the cinder-block back and side walls, the front of the cell has a solid steel frame, consisting of a locked steel door, similar to that of a prison cell (except with no bars to look out).

"As you can imagine, I love a good scare." He laughs.

I huddle into the far corner of the cell and pull the blanket over me, still trying to piece together what happened the night I was taken.

I remember talking to him for at least an hour at the bar and then following him out a side door. We walked toward the back of the building, where his car was supposedly parked. It was dark—a spotlight had busted—and we were passing by some trash cans. I remember trying to keep my balance while standing on a lid. Why was I doing that? And what happened afterward? Did I fall? Did anyone see me? Did I pass out before we drove away?

"Whatever you do, don't waste my time," he snaps. "Don't record how much you hate it here, or how you think I'm a monster. Those opinions are irrelevant to me. Is that understood?"

I nod, even though he can't see me, and dig my fingers into the dirt floor, trying my best to be strong.

"I'll be back in an hour," he says, as if time had any meaning for me since I don't have a watch.

I nibble on my fingernails, too nervous to care that they're covered in dirt. "Can I have more water first?" I ask, knowing that I'm speaking without permission, but needing to, because my throat feels dry, like sandpaper.

"Not until the tape's done," he snaps again.

I listen as he walks away, the soles of his shoes scuffing against the dirt floor. The door he entered by—the one that leads to a set of stairs (I've seen it through the hole in the wall)—creaks open, then slams shut. Those sounds are followed by more noises: bolts and locks and jingling keys. I remain huddled up, trying to reassure myself that I'm still alive, and that I'm still wearing the same clothes as the night I was taken, so he probably never touched me in any weird way. Maybe there's hope. Maybe once I'm done with his tape-recording project, he'll finally set me free.

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