

GONE

“What was that?” My mom grimaces at the shrieking noise as Jilly barks again, her thick lips pursing into a thin, colorless line. My aunt quickly grabs her attention and sucks her back into their work. They’re planning a new tattoo, together, by themselves, without me, I’m alone. Again.

Slowly, tears begin to sting my raged eyes. “I have no idea,” I mumble and stalk to the couch. They don’t notice, of course, so I dramatically sprawl across the cold, faux-leather cushions. Again nobody notices. “Okay whatever.” I hiss under my breath, determined to just forget my aloneness and remain strong. I’m not weak, not a cry baby, not for something like this.

My mom looks up at another Jilly-yip and sighs the my-kids-are-so-lazy sigh, the one everyone’s mom knows. But then, after stretching, she looks back down towards the plans.

Fine. If they want to be exclusive, who am I to stop them, I practically snarl into my brain.

I sneak back to her room and crawl on her bed, caressing the satisfying wrinkles that appear, knowing they’ll drive her crazy later. I flip through the movies, finally deciding on the next blockbuster in the *Divergent* series.

“Mom, can I watch this movie?” I yell from the room, but then walk out and put on my pretty-please smile: lots of teeth, lots of fake. She doesn’t even glance up.

“How much is it?” she says.

My mind jumps with glee as I deliver my next line, the one I had played over and over for the past two minutes. “Yeah, well, about that, remember when I said we should get the movie a couple days ago when it was only five dollars? Yeah, now it’s twenty.”

She stares up at my smug face. I am right, and she is wrong. She looks back to her computer, first throwing an apologetic look towards my aunt. “If you want to pay for half,” she huffs.

We hear Jilly’s screechy yelp again. Mom puffs as she pulls herself up, making me think of an in-shape 70-year-old. I devilishly smile as I picture her in spandex, twisting in her senior aerobics class. She glances around the room. I glance towards the couch and the small chair with the lumped-up blanket that often covers our other dog, Jack.

Mom runs to the front entry, her swift legs electrifying the floor.

She swings the door wide, letting in Jilly, then gasping. Her panic wakes our senses.

“*Where is Jack?*” she yells, worry escalating in her voice.

I baby-voice our elder dog’s name, “Jack, Jack, Jack?” I run to the little chair, suddenly realizing that the lump under the blanket isn’t him. Dread roots into me as I sprint towards the back closet and shake Jack’s harness.

Insides twisting tighter, I grab my brother, Andrew, knowing my aunt, mom, and other brother are already searching.

“Jack is out,” I tell him, keeping a calm cap on my desperation. We quickly walk towards the back door and are blasted with the noonday heat. Trying not to burn my feet, I step on the concrete and prowl the yard. I notice our gate, wide open, and stalk over angrily to slam it shut. Swinging my head back towards Andrew, I watch him jump the fence, searching frantically through the hiding weeds and dense woods calling for our escape artist.

“Jack, Jack, Jack!”

I run to the front and catch Mom and my aunt dashing down the street. They stop and step behind a truck, laughing as they look at something within. I feel a weight lift off my mind as I rush up, getting ready to scold our little dog. But the sidewalk seems short and my bliss naïve when I take in their smeared makeup. They hug, doubled over, choking on sobs.

I watch in terror as a small white bag is taken out of the truck, and Mom cradles it. Tears push past my eyelids and sobs come out strangled as we walk down the lonely sidewalk.

“Go find your brother.” Mom whispers.

I nod and run, feeling my legs pound the pavement, approving the burn that follows, a distraction from my grief.

I stop short as I see my brother waving and shouting, “I didn’t find him.”

My feet slap the sidewalk as I walk up. My sobs echo across the road.

“He is gone.” I whisper to Andrew.

His answer cuts deep, as it forces me to think about the large vacancy that has opened into my life. His strong, stony exterior kicks into gear. “What?”

“He’s dead.”