

Pretty Thing

There was only one other car, a grimy red hatchback, parked on the gravel driveway that served as the parking lot for the decrepit antique shop. The gray roof of the two-story building sagged in the middle, and red paint flaked off the siding of the house. I ran my hand through my hair and turned off the car, watching the color of the sky begin to deepen. It was almost six and I didn't want to be late for my first shift.

Gravel crunched under my feet as I made my way over to the porch steps. Since my interview, the stairs to the front door seemed to have caved in, and a wooden board bridged the gap between the porch and the gravel walkway. I walked slowly up the make-shift ramp, worried it might cave in, too. Littered around the porch were water-stained chairs and rusted bicycles. There was a rack of off-white dresses just outside the door, which was painted teal as if to offset the depression radiating from this poor old shack. *Nineteen an hour*, I told myself as I twisted the doorknob.

A soft bell chimed as I made my way past the hundred-clock greeting in the foyer, all reading different times. "Hello?" I called but received no response. The floors groaned as I walked through a low doorway into a room crowded with shelves. My shoulders were inches away from the aisles as I walked past dusty books, chipped vases, and unlit lamps. Between shelves of knickknacks, the air was still and cold. I slouched, trying to get myself as far away from the towering shelves as possible. *Is there another way out of this room?* I stood still where I was and glanced over my shoulder, seeing the entrance to the suffocating room about twenty feet away from me. A chill ran up my spine, and I shut my eyes. *Calm down, you haven't even been here five minutes.*

When I opened my eyes, the room had not gotten any larger, nor less full. The overhead lights flickered. I spun where I stood and shuffled quickly back to the foyer, getting out of under these towers of junk. Once I made it through the doorway, air returned to my lungs. I sighed and ran my hand through my hair, pushing it from my eyes.

A grandfather clock proudly stood in the far corner of the room at the bottom of the carpeted staircase. *Noon. Sounds right*, I thought as I shook my head. The rusted hands of the clock all pointed directly upward, unmoving despite the consistent swinging of the gold pendulum. I took a few slow steps toward the clock, admiring the details carved into the wood.

“Hello?” I called again.

Standing in the center of the foyer, I noticed a dark knobless wooden door under the stairs. A white piece of paper reading “EMPLOYEES ONLY” was taped to the door, which swung open when I pushed on it. I ducked my way through the low frame and enter a kitchen—or what used to be a kitchen. There was a gap in the counter where some sort of appliance used to be. The refrigerator was absent, and there was a hole in the island, surrounded by two inches of whiteness, stark against the jaundiced countertops.

“Hello?”

Still nothing. I walked across the room to a wooden table situated underneath a large window, which raindrops began to splatter. I pulled a chair out from the table, sat, and pulled my phone out of my pocket to call Meredith, the shop owner. *She’s got to be in here somewhere.*

The phone rang, and the rain grew heavier on the window, blurring my view of the road. I wished I’d worn a sweater; any form of warmth in this house was quickly disappearing. The shop seemed to creak and groan with every raindrop.

Behind me, a voice called, “Owen?” My phone fell from my hand, clacking against the floor. I snapped my head around to see a girl, roughly my age, with shoulder-length dark hair standing by the not-sink with her eyebrows raised. She started to laugh when I looked at her, and I found myself smiling back.

“Sorry, I was just looking for someone. Are you Meredith’s granddaughter?”

“Yeah, I totally forgot you were starting today.” She made her way over to the table, where she sat across from me. “I’m Emma”

The girl smiled, the corners of her mouth pushing on her freckled cheeks, which thinned her shining blue eyes. Dark curls rested gently on her shoulders, as if they had been carefully placed. Her smile closed over her teeth but didn’t go away entirely. She glowed, and my heart sped up.

I said the only thing that came to mind: “I’m Owen.”

“I know.” She giggled.

“Right, um—”

“C’mon, let me give you the tour.” With that she was up and strutting towards the door. I scrambled to grab my phone off the ground and followed her.

Once she reached the center of the foyer, Emma stopped and spun, facing me with a broad smile. “Welcome to the world of old-ass clocks. I’ve never witnessed someone actually purchase one of them, probably because most of them don’t work. That and Granny’s always getting attached to the antiques.” She pointed at the large grandfather clock, hands still pointing

to noon. “She loves that ancient thing, and it doesn’t even work.” She took a deep breath, softly shaking her head as she exhaled.

“Has she tried to fix it?”

“No. She says it doesn’t need to work. It’s just a pretty thing.” The thick weight of silence filled the air. “Next!” Emma announced, and she was moving. Again, I scurried behind her, letting her lead me into what I would consider the least depressing room of the run-down store, where Meredith interviewed me at a rectangular table with three matching chairs. By far the largest in the house, the L-shaped room was filled with couches, tables, dressers, and assorted old furniture. As with anything in the shop, the furniture varied in quality. Some couches had been patched so many times, I couldn’t tell which fabric was the original, but there was an ornate bathtub in one corner with shining golden feet and minimal chips to the porcelain.

“So, all of the items are marked with one of these orange tags.” Emma pointed to a sticker in the middle of a short, round table. My grandmother buys all the new antiques, and then she goes through and marks the items she thinks will sell for higher prices. I get to handle all the little trinkets, and so do you, now. Back here,” she pointed towards a desk under a window, “is where people make purchases. We take cash or check and handwrite receipts, which I can show you later if someone even shows up.”

“If?” I gaped. “How dead is this place?”

“Oh, don’t you know?” Emma stretched her arms to either side of her, gesturing to the shop, and deadpanned, “This is the spot to be on a Friday night.”

I let out a breathy laugh. “Okay, okay. But seriously, no customers at all in a night?”

Emma flopped down on a red couch, dust erupting on either side of her. She didn't seem to react to the allergen assault, but it made me sneeze from five feet away. "Bless you. And, yeah, the only people that really come here are old ladies and people who know an old lady that just died."

"So, we're getting paid to sit in this old shack for a couple of hours and lock the front door at ten?"

"Pretty much! Come sit," she said, patting the dust-coated couch beside her.

I paused but decided I would rather be sitting next to Emma than not have dust on my pants. I slowly lowered myself next to her, doing my best not to upset the dust. "How long has it been since someone has touched this?"

"Oh, I sit on this couch every day. The dust is inescapable."

Nineteen an hour, nineteen an hour, nineteen an hour.

"Okay." Emma's smile disappeared, and she looked up at me with a frown. "I know this job isn't, like, amazing or anything, but Granny said she's paying you well, and a lot of the stuff here is actually pretty cool. Some of the items have awesome backstories. Some lady sold us a rug from a pirate ship!"

A smile broke out across my face, quickly joined by a laugh. Emma watched me, confused.

"It's a true story!" she affirmed, and I did my best to tone down my chuckles. She smacked my arm lightly, and when that didn't stop me, she smacked again.

"Ow, what the hell?" I joked.

“Tell me what you’re laughing at!” Her eyebrows were raised, and her lips were sealed in a straight line. As my laughter died down, she smacked me one last time for good measure, and I could see the corners of her mouth begin to turn upwards.

“A pirate ship?”

“Yeah, she said her great grandfather was a captain and—no stop that! Seriously, Owen stop laughing.” I did not. “It’s not funny! Her great grandfather was a pirate captain, and he had this big red rug in his quarters!” Emma explained with an enthusiastic grin.

I shook my head. “Yeah, sure.”

Emma gasped theatrically. “Are you calling me a liar?” she demanded, prodding me in the ribs with a finger.

“No!” I nudged her hand away from me with my elbow. “I think some goofy lady told you a tall tale.”

She opened her mouth in a shocked expression, but the corners of her mouth turned upward, and her eyes shone. I was grinning like an idiot when a loud banging erupted from behind me.

Emma’s giggles stopped and my smile vanished as we stared at each other, mouths agape. Emma eased herself off the couch, but I remained frozen in place. *Bang!*

The floor shuddered under me. I swallowed, throat tightening. *Bang!* A chill ran up my spine, making the hairs at the base of my neck stand on end. As Emma walked by me, I found myself reaching out to stop her. Now standing with my hand on her shoulder, I asked, “What is that?”

She merely shrugged and started walking again. This time, I grabbed both of her shoulders. Now behind her, my heart thudded as she looked back at me. “Owen, it’s probably nothing.”

“I don’t recall nothing being that loud.”

She moved out of my grasp. “Fine. Just,” I sighed. “Let me go first.” Now unstuck from the floor, my feet gently stepped between assorted furniture. As the clocks came into view of the doorway, so did a tall, dark, slender figure, blocking the grandfather clock. I gasped and took a quick step backward, stepping on Emma’s foot.

“Oh my God, what is it?” She exclaimed. Instead of waiting for my answer, Emma grabbed both of my arms, shoving me forward and peering over my shoulder. “Owen!”

Emma walked around me and stuck out her hand to greet what turned out to be a very nice-looking lady in a knee-length black dress. “I am so sorry, ma’am,” she explained, “the rain’s got us spooked that’s all.”

“What was that noise?” I questioned.

“Owen!” Emma glared at me, but I saw no issue with my question.

“Oh, that. I was wanting to drop off an antique crib. It was my grandmother’s—handmade by her father,” the woman gushed.

Emma gently explained that the shop owner wasn’t here after six and told the woman to come back Monday when Meredith could take the sale.

“And what the hell do you want me to do with this thing? I pulled it all the way up the stairs!” the woman complained, pulling open the front door, revealing a white cradle, rocking in the wind.

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I shut the door behind me, hair and shirt soaked from the rain. Emma gave me a lopsided smile. “Thanks,” she said coyly.

“I am soaked. On the bright side, that lady still has an old wet crib she doesn’t want.”

“You acted like she was haunting the place!” Emma exclaimed with a small smile.

“Well, maybe she shouldn’t have been so ominous.”

She shook her head gently. “Back to the tour.”

She began walking through the array of clocks, towards the cramped room I had the misfortune of meeting earlier. I followed her, chewing on the inside of my lip. She paused next to the doorway. “After you,” she offered, gesturing past the low ceiling.

I forced a smile. “Oh, why thank you very much.” I gave her a nod as I walked past her, hunching my shoulders in preparation for the suffocating closeness.

Emma stayed close behind me as I meandered past hundreds of dusty trinkets. “So, there’s just kind of a bunch of crap in this room.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I noticed a growing pitch in my voice and did my best to lower it in front of Emma. “Like, *a lot* of crap.”

Emma was silent for a moment, but I kept walking, waiting for her cue to stop. The closer I got to the far wall, the smaller my steps became. I was deeper in this room than before; the walls seemed narrower, the shelves more packed, the air much thinner. My breaths came shallow and quick. My heart raced. I reached the last shelf in the row and saw that there was space between it and the wall, just enough to walk through.

“Go right.” Emma’s voice was cheery and warm. I followed her instructions, feeling tightness dissipate from my chest as I rounded the corner to be greeted with a large window, just out of view of the middle junk aisle. I stopped and turned to look outside at the trees, trying to forget the walls that threatened to close in all around me, but the shelving cast a looming shadow on the windowpanes.

Emma stood next to me, brushing her shoulder against mine. I didn’t move away from her, but I kept my eyes focused outward, staring intently in front of me. “Good?”

“Huh?” I asked, eyes still trained on the woods.

“Are you okay, Owen?”

“Sorry, I, uh. . . Its just—” I bit my lip, searching for the word, or any word. “Cramped. In here.”

“Oh. Sorry.” I brought myself to look over at Emma. She was staring blankly at a spot to my left, and one corner of her mouth bent down in a small, lopsided—kind of adorable—frown.

“No, it’s okay, you didn’t—”

“Do you just want to get out of here?”

Yes, please. “Um, sure.” I looked back at the window, watching the rain grow heavier, blurring my view of the trees. I felt a gentle push against my shoulder, followed by Emma speaking softly.

“Ready?”

The rain drowned out the imagine of the forest, making the window into just another wall. I could hear my own heartbeat and hoped Emma couldn't. I balled my fists and turned towards Emma. I gave her a firm nod.

She grabbed me by the wrist and forced herself past where I was standing. She broke into a run, pulling me down another narrow walkway. We dashed towards the foyer, and I didn't even try to see what was on these sets of shelves. Emma dragged me clear to the front door, as far away from Hell on Earth as the house allowed. My heart was still racing.

Emma's hand remained wrapped around my wrist, and she moved her other hand to rest on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just fine.” I pulled my eyebrows down, looking at her as if *she* was the crazy one.

My words didn't ease Emma's wide, worried eyes. She squeezed my shoulder and opened her mouth to speak when we heard a crash from the room of trinkets.

“No, no, no.” Emma dropped my wrist, rushing back into the room. I followed her to the doorway, but no further, watching her disappear behind sets of tall shelves. After checking a few aisles, she emerged from the farthest shelf, holding two pieces of a spotted blue vase. Her forehead was scrunched with worry as she moved past me, back to the not-kitchen.

“What happened?”

“We knocked over a vase. It was marked at *twenty-five!*” Emma placed the pieces on the countertop and started opening drawers. “Granny’s going to *kill* me.”

“Emma, we weren’t over there.”

“It doesn’t matter, the vase is still—”

“No, I’m saying that—”

“Yes!” Emma pulled gorilla glue from a drawer next to the not-fridge. She pushed her hair behind her ears, disrupting the perfect coils of her hair.

“Emma!”

“What?”

I took a deep breath. “There’s no reason that vase fell. We weren’t over there. Besides, we heard it fall after we left.”

Emma looked me up and down. “Things fall sometimes, man.”

Great, now you’re being crazy. “It’s just. Weird. That’s all.”

Emma sighed and began gluing the bottom half of the vase. I shrank back to the table, running my hand through my hair. “Why don’t you go sit in the living room? Listen for customers.” Emma requested, not looking up from her project. I nodded, stood and made my way out of the room.

I situated myself on the red couch, just as dusty as before. The rain plunked loudly on the roof as I pulled out my phone, checking the time. *It’s only been an hour?* I sighed, hoping Emma wouldn’t stay mad. I scrolled Instagram, keeping an ear out for customers.

I'd become accustomed to the comfort and distraction of another person. Without Emma, the house seemed to double in size, which—surprisingly—did nothing to ease my tension. Every creak and groan of the house sent me spinning to find the source of the sound. The rain didn't quiet, and all remaining sunlight quickly faded from the windows. The room was littered with old, tarnished lamps, but the overhead light wasn't on, and I couldn't find a light switch. Before I knew it, I was alone in a dim room, wondering if Emma would ever come back.

I began pacing back and forth across the room, too antsy to sit on any of the dusty couches and chairs. I kept wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans and pushing the hair off my forehead. Every so often, a lamp would flicker; one went out entirely and sputtered back to life after a few minutes. I walked back and forth, shoulders tense, goosebumps littering my folded arms.

I froze in place, shivers running up and down my spine. *Is that music?* Soft, high notes carried through the doorway.

Maybe it's Emma, I considered. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *There's a rational explanation.* Before giving myself time to reconsider, I walked hastily out of the room, the volume of the music compounding with each step. I stood among the clocks, listening. The music was floating down the wooden stairs.

Rational explanation, rational explanation. Emma's probably up there. My heart pounded as I set my hand on the railing with an ominous creak. "Where are you going?" Emma asked, emerging from the not-kitchen.

My heart stopped for a brief second before continuing at double the speed. I put a hand on my chest. "Stop doing that! And there's music, I was going to see what it was."

“Ooh, getting brave,” Emma joked, nudging my shoulder with a broad smile. Her curls had lost their flawless form, frizzing slightly. “You haven’t seen upstairs yet, have you?”

“No.”

Her face lit up, and she clasped her hands in front of her chest. “We have to go, c’mon, c’mon.”

Emma pulled herself up the stairs quickly, not concerned about the music. *If she didn’t start it, what did?* I forced one foot in front of the other, up the stairs after Emma. *Stop being so dramatic*, I scolded myself.

After clearing the top step, Emma stopped abruptly. She looked over her shoulder and said, “This is my favorite part.” Once she was facing away from me again, she added, “Don’t freak out.”

I brought myself next to her on the step, with a newfound urge to freak out. Emma flipped a light switch, illuminating a thousand unmoving faces. Across from me, dolls sat in cases along the wall, smiling hauntingly at nothing. Under a window, a toybox overflowed with dolls with varying sizes and skin tones. Next to it, a matching box was crowded with tiny clothes, purses, and bottles. A wide shelf opposite the doll bin showcased even more porcelain figures, pressed shoulder to shoulder. Many of them wore frizzy braids and stained dresses. Some of them leaned slightly forward as if intrigued by whatever lies in front of them. Others slumped to the side, too old and tired to sit up straight.

My eyes darted from doll to doll, each one more horrifying than the last. Many dolls donned jagged cracks along their arms, legs, and even faces. Some had dresses with lace falling off the hems, or even fabric torn clear off their plastic bodies. Creepiest of all, five glass cases,

fitted with gorgeous wooden trim and LED lighting sat in the far back of the room. In them, each doll was sitting on its own tiny chair, with a pose straight out of a vintage portrait.

One doll with sweet pigtail braids held a white and pastel pink lacey umbrella, looking off into the distance with rosy cheeks. Another, a little glass boy, sat with his legs wide and arms crossed, wearing a tall cone hat reading “DUNCE”. In the center of the porcelain horror show, sat a doll with a neat blonde perm. She wore a light pink dress that hung just below her knees, with a high, lacey neckline. Her hands were folded neatly in her lap, and she crossed her ankles daintily. The head was positioned to be looking straight forward, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was staring right at me.

“Freaking out?” Emma asked.

I looked at her and opened my mouth but closed it once I realized no words were coming out. Even as I looked away, I felt that stupid blonde thing’s eyes boring into my skull. I shoved my hands in my pockets to stop them from trembling. Emma put a hand on my shoulder.

“Owen?”

“Yeah?” I said shakily. I was looking right at Emma, poorly containing the fear that filled every bone in my body. Needless to say, I was freaking out.

“Don’t worry. They’re nice.” She smiled, setting a hand on my shoulder. I stared at her, heart hammering. *They’re nice?* “They’re dolls, they can’t hurt you.”

I took a small step closer to Emma but looked back at the blonde doll. Her head was turned to the left. “Let-let’s go.” I turned, but Emma clenched my shoulder and pulled me back around.

“Oh c’mon, Owen,” she mocked, walking towards the center of the room. “They’re kind of cool, right? Granny spent *years* collecting and perfecting hundreds of dolls. She has lots but *these*,” her eyes widened, “are the best of the best.”

“Great. Let’s go.”

Emma didn’t move. Her eyes had gone dim, and the corners of her mouth pointed down more. “Are you always this jumpy?”

“No, but this place is creepy and its dark and—” I grabbed my forehead “—what is that music?”

“Oh, yeah.” Emma walked to the middle display box, clicking a button that sat on top of a wooden plank. “Their music boxes go off sometimes.”

“That’s creepy! And I swear to God that middle one moved.” I panted. *This is so stupid, stop freaking out.* I let my arms fall to the side, feeling the dampness of my underarms.

“Fine. Let’s go back down,” Emma relented, “but you have to get used to all of this eventually.”

“I will.”

“I hope so.” She turned around, walking down the stairs without another word. I followed her, leaving a few feet of space between us. *Why am I like this?*

Emma walked back into the crowded room with the shelving, where I didn’t dare follow. I sighed, feeling my heart float down to my stomach, which began to turn.

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I was back on the red couch, scrolling through my phone, hoping it didn't die before the end of the night. I was beginning to ease up. I no longer jumped every time a lamp flickered, which had become an almost constant occurrence. The dust cloud that manifested when I shifted on the couch no longer sent a chill down my spine, and I no longer pondered the cause for every creak and groan of the old house. Instead, I was haunted by the disappointed frown Emma wore when she walked away from me. I stared at the ceiling, wondering what I could do to make up for insulting her grandma's collection of creepy dolls.

Feeling antsy, I stood up and began to pace the room. Around the corner I could see the flash of a lamp. On. Off. On. Off. . . On. Finally, I stomped around the corner, searching for the lamp with the faulty bulb. A sudden illumination caught my eye from the left. I marched over to a tall floor lamp. Compared to the rest of the shop, the fixture was boring. A circular black base grew into a gold stem, capped with an unornate white lampshade.

I grabbed onto the simple black cord and yanked it from the wall. Off. Tension released from my shoulders, along with air from my lungs. When I turned away from the lamp, I faced my shadow on the opposite wall. I looked over my shoulder to find the lamp glowing brightly.

Just then, my ears were split by a high-pitched scream. *Emma*. I bounded out of the furniture room and back into the foyer, heart racing. I hadn't seen her for almost an hour, and I didn't know where to find her. Luckily, she found me.

She rushed down the stairs, mascara-clouded tears running down her reddened face. When she reached the landing, she held out her hand, face up. Bleeding lines snaked diagonally across her palm. I met Emma at the bottom of the stairs, reaching for her. She placed the back of

her hand on top of mine. Further examination revealed that the blood was oozing from three deep scratches on her delicate palms.

I looked up at her puffy eyes. “How did this happen?”

“Oh,” She looked somewhere over my shoulder, and continued, “I dropped something.” Emma’s tears had suddenly stopped coming, and she pulled her hand back, wiping her remaining tears with her shirtsleeves.

“What?”

She dropped her shoulders and rolled her eyes. “What? What do you mean ‘what?’”

“I—” I started, but Emma scoffed, pushed past me, and began walking towards the not-kitchen.

“Whatever, I’ll handle this.”

“I’m just worried about you,” I spat, mind reeling to come up with a reason for her sudden coldness. “Jeez.”

Emma stopped and took in a deep, loud breath. Her hands clenched into fists beside her, red dripping onto the wood floor. She pivoted, facing me with a saccharine smile. “I’m sorry, Owen.” My breathe caught in my throat as she placed her bloody hand on my bare upper arm. “I’m sorry I was so harsh. I’m just scared that’s all.” She squeezed my arm, warm liquid squelching under her hand and moving downwards towards my elbow.

I wanted to talk but pursed my lips against the rise of bile in my throat. My stomach turned, my legs went numb, my lungs refused to exhale. Emma’s curls frayed at the edges, loose dark strands sticking to the wet make-up smeared across her face.

Slowly, she released her grip on my arm. She turned robotically and walked into the not-kitchen. I inhaled shallowly through my nose and forced myself to look at the blood on my arm. My entire body was trembling, and icy blood ran through my veins. There wasn't a handprint, but a messy lake of red that branched into thin rivers down my arm.

My feet were frozen to the floor until Emma reemerged from the swinging door with a wet, white cloth. She moved towards me, reaching cloth towards my arm, but I stepped backwards and shook my head at her.

"Come here, Owen." Her eyes brows drew close to each other in worry. Her haunting smile had been replaced by an exaggerated frown. "You're hurt."

"No, Emma." I narrowed my eyes. "*You're* hurt."

Emma tilted her head and her eyes widened, but she didn't say a word.

"Your hand," I reminded her helplessly.

Emma rested the cloth on the stair railing and held up both of her hands, displaying two palms with pristine, unbroken flesh.

I tangled both of my hands in my hair, gripping tightly as if to my own sanity. "I—but?" I breathed heavily and quickly. Somewhere buried under the overbearing sound of my own panting, music played. I pulled my hands down from my hair to cover my eyes.

Emma's voice joined the orchestra. "Owen, let me help you." Her soft words fell over me like a blanket. *I'm losing my mind.* I didn't uncover my eyes, and I didn't answer her. Light pressure fell on my shoulders, and I let Emma guide me to a sitting position on the bottom step. "Look at me," she said.

I brought my hands down off my face and forced my eyes upwards. She was standing in front of me, suddenly towering above me, and a familiar tight feeling returned to my chest. Emma smiled widely as she retrieved the cloth from the railing before shifting her gaze towards me. Her voice found a new pitch and a patronizing lilt. "It's gonna be okay, pretty thing." She pushed her lips forward into a sympathetic pout as she leaned over me, placing the cool cloth on my upper arm.

Emma's face smiled inches from mine as she tended to my "wound". She was hunched over me, and I looked up at her pale face, which grew further and further away. The cloth, once the size of my hand, now dampened my arm from my shoulder to my elbow. My eyes scanned the once cramped room. Behind Emma, a wall-mounted clock seemed to rise in position on the wall. I tried to move my head to see the door, but my neck erupted in burning pain as my vision remained focused ahead of me. My feet lifted off the floor and dangled off the step.

The cool sensation of the cloth on my arm was replaced with fire as I tried to push against Emma's gentle touch. She dropped the cloth on the stair next to me. "I'll be right back." Emma announced enthusiastically and left my line of vision.

I could see nine clocks. They all ticked at different paces. I had no idea how long I waited before Emma returned with a small wire-bristled hairbrush and a sloshing blue plastic bowl.

She sat on the floor in front of me, placing the bowl and brush to my right. I wanted to scream, but my mouth and throat seared when I tried to perform the action. I heard soft splashing and dripping water before Emma pulled another wet cloth into my view.

She brought the cloth right under my eye. The force of Emma's rubbing pushed against my skin, but I could not feel the pressure on my cheekbone. Instead of dull pressure, Emma's

scrubs left the sensation of being pinched as she worked her way across my face. When she was satisfied with the cleanliness of my face, she wrapped the cloth around my arm, squeezing slightly, then massaging my arm through the cloth, working her way from my shoulder to my hand. She repeated the task on my other arm and placed the cloth somewhere I couldn't see.

"Pretty thing," she cooed as she ran the brush through my hair.

Emma stood, her full height dwarfing what I had become. My heart clinked powerfully against my porcelain chest as Emma looked down at me, beaming brighter than ever before. After a moment of prideful gazing, Emma reached her arms towards me.

She held me around the waist, stretching her arms in front of her. Over her shoulder, the foyer grew lower and lower in my view, as she carried me to the second story. My stomach sloshed as Emma broke into a jolly skip across the room, passing hundreds of dolls.

Emma came to a sudden stop. One of her hands stopped squeezing my midsection, and I swung sideways, dangling from her remaining hand. I could see the outside of her opposite hand, which reached out of sight, followed by the metallic sound of a latch and a slow creak. A slight moment of silence was followed by a blonde doll crashing on the floor next to Emma.

Her porcelain face exploded, littering the floor with broken shards. The form of her wig caved in once the structure of her head gave out. In the rubble of her death, one blue eye remained trained on me as the world shifted again.

Emma lifted me back in front of her, pushing me backward. Reflective glass clouded my periphery, and Emma grabbed hold of my limbs. Her eyebrows pushed her eyelids downward, obstructing my view of her eyes as she forced me properly into the dead doll's chair. She grabbed my hands, pulling them in unison to my lap, where they rested daintily.

Emma sighed, and one side of her mouth turned upwards into a lopsided smile. She took a step back from the display and rested a hand on the open door of the case, swiftly swinging it shut. The LEDs from the case made the glass appear an opaque white. I could no longer see Emma, nor anything else in the room. There were mere inches between my face and the glass. Air would not fill my lungs, and my throat and stomach exploded in flames as I tried to force my breathing. The clinking of my heart grew louder and louder, trapped in a box. Tears pooled behind my eyes but couldn't break past the painful glass of my eyelids.

“You're my new favorite,” Emma said, voice muffled through the glass.