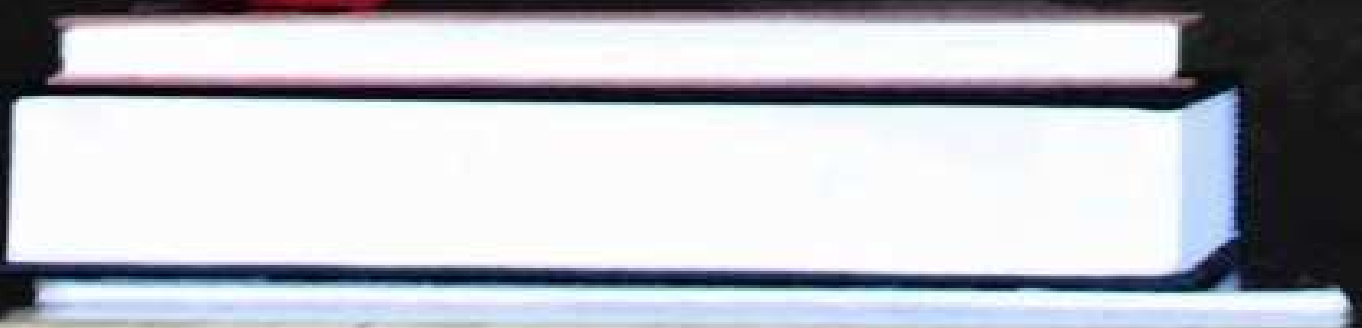




The Teacher

Meg Gray



THE TEACHER

Written by Meg Gray

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Publisher Meg Gray

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For my husband, Trevor. Where would I be without you?

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Chapter One

Marcus Lewis reached for the doorknob of his penthouse condo when a high-pitched feral scream emanated from the kitchen. His heart lurched. He dropped his briefcase and spun on his heel. The staccato beat of his clipped footsteps echoed on the black slate floor as he raced to find his son.

In front of the stove, the newest nanny stood with a pot set to boil. Her black rimmed eyes, as large as saucers, stared at his screaming child.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Marcus demanded, flipping off the gas burner to extinguish the flame. “I told you to *never* turn the stove on.”

“No you didn’t,” she said, shaking her head, her long black ponytail shimmied with the movement.

“Yes I did,” he fired back. He knew he told her. He told everyone that had cared for his son in the last three years. How could anyone, even this nineteen-year-old college flunky, not remember that one simple rule?

“No you didn’t,” she protested again, but he wasn’t about to get into a *Yes I did, No you didn’t* fight with this nanny-girl. He could feel the anger swell inside him as he leveled her with his eyes and watched her squirm under his penetrating gaze.

“Whatever,” she said. Marcus saw the way she rolled her eyes when she turned to pull the pot from the stove and that pissed him off even more. “It won’t happen again,” she said, pouring the water into the sink.

“Damn right it won’t happen again,” he told her. “Because you’re fired.”

“What?” she asked, whipping around to look at him. Marcus couldn’t hear the word over the clatter of the pot in the sink, but he could read it hanging there on her purple painted lips.

“You’re fired,” he said again. She held his gaze. Marcus clenched his jaw and wondered if he would have to repeat himself. The finality of his words must have sunk in and she dropped her eyes to the floor.

“Whatever.” A disgusted sigh and another roll of the eyes followed the word. She headed for the door. Marcus let out a sigh of his own when he heard the door close behind her. Only then did he turn his attention to his son, whose cries had turned to muffled sobs.

Hunched over in his chair at the bar, Brayden’s chin quivered as he stared down at the empty bowl in front of him. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

“Let’s go,” Marcus said and picked up Brayden. He carried him to the bedroom and sat him on the perfectly made bed with the baseball comforter. Brayden made no attempt to help as Marcus struggled against his limp feet with his sneakers.

“Time to go to school Bray,” Marcus said when the sneakers were finally on and tied in double knots. He pulled Brayden by the hand and checked the time on the wall clock.

“I don’t wanna go,” Brayden said, planting his feet and pulling against his father.

“Too bad,” Marcus said, potato sacking his son over his shoulder. He grabbed the coat and backpack laid out at the foot of the bed.

“I’m not going,” Brayden cried, kicking his feet.

Marcus didn’t waste words arguing. Instead, he grabbed his briefcase and let the door slam shut.

Marcus went for the stairwell. He’d suffered enough glares and stares in the elevator from other tenants to know, he should use the stairs when Brayden was having a meltdown. At the bottom of the five flights, he pushed open the door to the parking garage.

Marcus couldn’t help but wonder if he’d been too quick to fire the nanny this morning as he carried his crying child through the garage. Perhaps the nanny’s error wasn’t as terrible as it initially seemed. Perhaps she wouldn’t let it happen again like she’d promised. She’d survived the last two days without much incident. Maybe he should have at least let her get Brayden off to school today because now he was going to be late for work...again.

As Marcus wavered about his decision, Brayden’s scream and the terror reflected in his small crystal blue eyes came rushing back. No, he made the right decision. That girl was as incompetent as all the others he’d hired and fired from that nanny agency since they moved to

Portland. He would call this afternoon and see if they had any nannies without a memory loss problem.

Marcus found his black Mercedes and wrestled Brayden into his booster seat. The front passenger seat bucked as Brayden's kicking feet made contact with it. Marcus levered it forward after securing Brayden's buckles. Walking around the car, he slid into the driver's seat and started the engine. Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 streamed through the speakers and Marcus cranked the volume to drown out Brayden's wails. He exited the parking garage, turning in the opposite direction of his office, and headed toward the elementary school he enrolled Brayden in yesterday.

In the school parking lot, they created a scene as Marcus extracted Brayden from the backseat. He dragged his son into the two-story brick school building and passed under a large banner reading "Welcome Back Fitzpatrick Panthers." Other parents and children stared at him.

He found the kindergarten classroom as his cell phone rang, undoubtedly someone from the firm calling to tell him he was late. He reached into his pocket and silenced the ring. When he looked up, a young woman stood in front of him staring like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Hi, I'm Ms. Hewitt," she said, stepping forward.

Marcus nodded and pulled Brayden out in front of him. "This is Brayden."

"Hi Brayden," she said, bending down to meet Brayden at eye level.

The damn cell phone shrieked from inside his pocket again. Marcus dropped Brayden's hand and backpack before he turned away from the classroom. He checked the number on his phone. It was the office. He rushed out to his car and sped away from the school, ignoring the signs that said *fines double in school zone*. He was late, he hated being late and he hated being reminded he was late.

"Damn it," he cursed, slapping his palm on the steering wheel as he pushed through the downtown traffic. He wasn't supposed to be the one taking Brayden to school or the one hiring and firing the nanny, or even choosing the school for Brayden to attend. It was supposed to be Vanessa's job. She was supposed to be the one walking with Brayden holding his hand, her long

blond hair smoothed flat and flawless, wearing whatever fashion was trending now, bright red lips smiling and eyes full of life. Brayden was supposed to skip happily into his classroom at Seattle's premiere private school, the same one he and Vanessa had attended.

None of that was happening. Vanessa had been gone for three years and Marcus left Seattle at the first opportunity he got to transfer out of state. He'd needed to escape—to go where he wouldn't look for her face in the crowds or glance over his shoulder thinking she was right behind him.

Marcus was trying to be a good father. He enrolled Brayden in preschool at the best private school in Portland last year, Portland Private Academy, but the headmaster kicked him out before the first week was over. The same thing happened at the next school and the next. Even when Marcus offered to pay double the tuition, no one would keep Brayden. Two days ago, Brayden was kicked out of his fourth private school. All day yesterday, Marcus was on the phone trying to find another school with an opening. There were none. As a last resort, he enrolled Brayden in public school. It was a decision he knew his parents would never support—if they ever found out.

Since becoming a single father, his parents met every decision he made with scrutiny. He had always done what was expected of him from the colleges he attended to the profession he pursued and the woman he married. The path had been simple to follow until the unexpected happened and Marcus's world crumbled. He was trying to navigate through the ruins of his life, but his compass was broken. The sudden changes and decisions he needed to make were difficult.

He was doing the best he could, but Brayden didn't make things easy. Teacher after teacher and nanny after nanny called Brayden a bad kid, impossible to handle, and unfit for a classroom.

Brayden had always been difficult, even as an infant. The doctors thought he had colic, crying all the time and wanting to be held, but it didn't pass after the initial three months.

Marcus could remember waking in the middle of the night to Brayden's cries from the

nursery. Unable to rouse Vanessa he would throw on his robe and shuffle in to pick up the baby. After a diaper change and bottle, Marcus sat in the glider rocker with Brayden over his shoulder, listening to his tiny baby coos and petite burps. When he put his son back down in the crib, Brayden would cry, flail his fists, and pull his knees up to his stomach. So, night after night during Brayden's first year, Marcus fell asleep in that rocking chair holding his son.

That felt like a lifetime ago.

The traffic light ahead turned yellow. Marcus pressed down on the accelerator. He glided through the intersection and turned into the parking garage. His tires squealed. The sound echoed off the concrete walls. He whipped the car into a narrow space and came to an abrupt halt as he cut the engine. He grabbed his briefcase and leapt from the car.

In the elevator, he glanced at his Swiss made watch and wished the hands were wrong. He was ten minutes late. The elevator sounded at the eighteenth floor and he stepped off. He opened the doors to the Lewis and Sons Law Firm with a jerk. Gretta, with her cardigan draped over her slender shoulders, greeted him.

"Good morning, Mr. Lewis, they're waiting..."

"I know," Marcus clipped impatiently and continued on his fast-paced walk to the conference room. He sucked in a deep breath and blew it out before he pushed the heavy wood-paneled door open.

"My apologies," he said as he breezed into the conference room and flashed a grin. "First day of kindergarten for my son."

A series of nods trickled around the table from the other partners as if they understood the difficulties Marcus faced this morning. But they didn't. How could they, when all of them had nannies or spouses to field those responsibilities? None of them knew what Marcus battled this morning, least of all his father who glared at him on the large teleconference screen at the front of the room.

* * *

As the day went on Marcus got back into his groove. He dove head first into his work and

barely came up for air. After the meeting with the partners this morning, he reviewed his associates' due diligence summaries and sent them back with a lot of red ink.

His client, The Brooks Family Corporation, was interested in buying a substantial parcel of land to build a new luxury hotel. Neither of his associates mentioned the location of the proposed hotel or any environmental issues that may arise. An amateur mistake, but completely unacceptable.

The need to analyze every detail was critical. Once the ground broke for construction, the federal and state agencies would be all over them. A waterway of America ran along the edge of the property, which needed special consideration. There was no room for error in this multi-million dollar acquisition.

Marcus took comfort in his work. He was good at it, aligning the details of a deal and following procedures. The black and white world of corporate law was his refuge from the obscure landscape of the rest of his life.

The events of this morning felt miles away as he sat at his desk and reviewed loan documents. He was marking them up when a knock sounded at his door.

"Come in," he said, dropping his pen.

Gretta entered with a pink message slip in her hand. She didn't say anything, just put the note in front of him and walked out.

Ms. Hewitt, he read at the top in Gretta's impeccable penmanship.

Marcus wasn't surprised. Teachers always called about Brayden and the messages were always the same; *Brayden wasn't following directions. Brayden didn't participate in the class activity today. Brayden hit someone. Brayden broke something. Brayden kicked the music teacher. Come pick up your son.*

Marcus checked his watch. At least the teacher didn't call until the end of the day so, whatever the infraction, it couldn't be that bad. Gretta would have inquired about the urgency of the message. He trained her to do this early on, so his work wasn't continuously interrupted with phone calls. With nothing but a phone number listed Marcus dismissed the message entirely.

The shredder ripped the paper to bits as Marcus fed it into the slot. Right now, he couldn't worry about Brayden's teacher. He had work to do and because he fired the nanny-girl this morning, he would be the one picking Brayden up from the afterschool program at six.

Chapter Two

The first week of school was finished. Done. Over. Survived.

Emma dropped into the chair behind her desk and dialed her phone.

“Lewis and Sons Law Firm. How may I direct your call?” a feminine, almost automated sounding voice answered.

“May I speak to Marcus Lewis?”

“One moment, please. May I ask who is calling?”

“This is Emma Hewitt, Brayden’s teacher.”

“And is this an emergency Ms. Hewitt?”

“No. I’d just like to talk to him about his son.”

“Please, hold.”

Silence.

“I’m sorry,” the voice said, returning to the line. “Mr. Lewis is not available. May I take a message?”

“Yes,” Emma said, sighing. “Please have him call me when he gets a chance.” Emma rattled off the school’s number before hanging up.

Emma stood and straightened her desk, ready to leave the stuffy classroom behind. If she left now she’d be able to run back to her apartment, change out of her Fitzpatrick Panther t-shirt and pick up the instructions she’d left behind that would help her navigate to her sister’s home. She’d been to Audrey’s house hundreds of times, but always driven up from her home town. Now that she lived inside the city with no car, she hadn’t the foggiest idea about how to get anywhere using the public transportation system.

“So, how was your first week?” Susan, another kindergarten teacher, asked strolling into her room with her matching Fitzpatrick t-shirt. She pulled a small pretzel from a plastic bag and popped it in her mouth.

“I survived, didn’t I?” Emma replied half-joking, because right now all she could think

about was how she'd kept track of twenty-eight kids for the last six hours. There wasn't much else she could recall.

Mary Ellen, the senior member of the kindergarten trio, bustled through the door and handed a stack of papers to Susan and then to Emma.

"These are the activities for next week," she said. Emma tried to smile her thanks, but Mary Ellen had dropped off stacks of activities for Emma to use all week. Her desk overflowed, like the banks of the Willamette River after a winter storm, with the unused papers. It was as if the woman didn't think Emma had a clue about teaching kindergarten, despite her three previous years of experience. She was new to the school, not the profession.

As soon as Emma set the papers on her desk, Mary Ellen started in on her about her class. First, she chastised Emma for letting Marriah, a tiny girl who was born prematurely and struggled to catch up to her peers in size and ability, hold her hand during the day. Then, she warned her about the assistant, assigned to work with Donald, a little boy with Down syndrome. Apparently, Sandy—the assistant—liked to take breaks and if Emma wasn't careful, she'd probably be gone half the day. She lectured Emma on Brayden, whom she called Brandon even after Emma corrected her, because he hung back from the class and was being "passive aggressive" toward Emma's authority. At some point during this lecture, Susan slipped out of the room. Emma stood alone and speechless, staring at the woman she'd likened to Mother Goose during her interview. Mary Ellen had a cloud of white hair and spectacles, which sat at the end of her nose. Over the last ten days, though, Emma had yet to hear anything soft and nursery rhymish come out of her mouth. It seemed it was Mary Ellen's duty to point out every one of Emma's faults.

Somehow, Emma escaped her room without any further reprimands and hurried down the street in search of the blue line rail. She didn't have time to go back for Audrey's directions, not if she wanted to arrive on time. How hard could it be? All she had to do was get on the train heading west. Surely, it couldn't be that hard.

* * *

Two hours later, Emma tried to rest her eyes as the cab wound its way up the steep suburban street. The angry sound of the cab's muffler punctuated her quietude as the car accelerated out of another curve.

Emma's body rolled toward the door as the car turned onto the next side street. The road leveled out and Emma knew she was almost to her sister's house, finally. She looked out the window and watched the trees pass by. Carefully pruned shrubs and manicured lawns harmonized the homes in this quiet neighborhood.

Audrey's two-story craftsman style home came into view and Emma saw the hanging baskets on the front porch, spilling over with white and red petunias. They'd been there since the Fourth of July. In another week or two, Audrey would toss them out to make room for scarecrows, straw bales, and pumpkins.

The cab pulled to the curb. Emma jumped out and paid the greasy haired driver. Crimson and gold streaked the sky as the summer sun reluctantly began its decent. The smell of grilled meat lingered in the air. Beach Boys music and children's shouts rode the summer's evening breeze from the backyard.

Emma hoisted the strap of her quilted tote bag onto her aching shoulder and made her way through the maze of minivans and SUVs parked in the driveway. She rounded the side of the house and followed the path to the backyard, hoping she had enough energy in reserve to survive this family-studded barbeque.

A handful of children played in her nieces' playhouse while their mothers stood guard on the lawn and cast their conversations sideways at one another, never taking their eyes off the children. The men, on the other hand, sat kicked back on the patio beneath the white pergola with Finn McCormack, Audrey's Irish-born husband. They wore dark sunglasses and held bottles of beer. Emma scanned the two groups, finding Audrey absent from both.

Stepping onto the patio, Emma heard Finn's robust laugh rise up in response to one of the other men. Emma looked in his direction and he caught her eye. He waved heartily, his entire face lit up by his smile. She waved back before she slipped through the back door.

Inside the kitchen, Emma found Audrey three steps up on a small ladder, reaching into the cabinet above her stainless steel refrigerator.

“Hey, what’re you doing up there?” Emma asked as she dropped her bag onto the seat of a barstool.

Audrey teetered on her perch and grabbed the frame of the cupboard before she looked down, “Geez, Em, you scared me.”

“Sorry, but seriously, what *are* you doing up there?” Emma walked over to stand next to the ladder.

“I was just checking our tequila stash. I thought we were running a little low and I was going to send Finn to the store if we needed more, but I found some.” She held up an unopened bottle. Audrey closed the cupboard and grabbed for the ladder’s handle with her free hand as she stepped down. At the bottom, she nearly lost her balance and Emma reached for her. Audrey took hold of her sister’s forearm and then straightened. She pulled her hand back and pressed it to her forehead.

“Are you okay?” Emma asked.

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine.” Audrey said, as she set the bottle down and cracked the seal open. “Long day,” she added and poured a splash of tequila into her margarita glass.

Emma watched her sister sip the cocktail. Audrey’s long dark brown hair was secured into a casual French twist. The belt at the waist of her short denim sundress was slimming. She looked perfect, just like always.

Audrey let out a relaxed sigh as she put her glass down. “Where have you been anyway?” Audrey asked. “I was beginning to wonder if you were coming at all.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” Emma apologized. “I got lost.”

“Lost? How could you get lost? I gave you explicit directions on how to get here.”

Emma thought of Audrey’s detailed directions sitting on the kitchen counter in her apartment and desperately wished she’d gone back gone for them.

“I forgot them at home,” Emma told her sister and looked down at the toes peeking out of

her sandals. “I thought I could remember them, but it was more confusing than I thought.” Emma left out the part about asking a guy sitting on a bench near the train stop which train would take her west. He pointed to the train coming up the track and smiled at her with yellow stained teeth encircled by an overgrown beard and mustache. When the train arrived, he stood up and clomped away in his unlaced hiking boots. He shouldered an army green duffel bag and pulled on the leash of his mutt. She climbed aboard the train never once thinking she’d been led astray. When she reached the eastern outskirts of the city and searched for a cab, she realized she’d learned her first big-city lesson—taking directions from a bum on the street, was not a good idea. She knew Audrey would scold her for it and she couldn’t bear the thought of another lecture. Mary Ellen had given her enough for one day.

“Emma! You’ve got to be careful out there. Portland is a big city and if you get lost, you might end up in a very bad place. This isn’t Orchard Creek where you can stroll along without a care in the world.”

“I know,” Emma said, her voice shook from the tickle of sadness that rose in her throat. She took a deep breath and pushed back the wave of homesickness brought on by the mention of her hometown.

“I miss Bessy,” Emma added.

“What, that old clunker? Emma, honey you’re better off without her,” Audrey said and then took another sip from her glass.

“Well, at least I wasn’t at the mercy of public transportation with my own car.”

“Oh, you’ll get used to it,” Audrey reassured her. “You’re a city girl now.”

Emma didn’t think she could ever call herself a city girl. Born and raised on their family’s twenty-acre peach orchard she embraced her country roots, unlike Audrey who shed them at her first opportunity.

“Well, I still miss the freedom of having my own car,” Emma said.

“Then buy something,” Audrey said with a hint of impatience. “You’ve been living rent free with Mom and Dad. You must have some savings to put toward a car.” Audrey didn’t wait

for an answer before she turned to the refrigerator and pulled the door open.

Of course, Audrey would assume Emma's bank account was brimming. Audrey attended college on an athletic scholarship, and after graduation, she landed a job with one of Portland's top accounting firms. Emma, on the other hand, went to a state college courtesy of the U.S. Government's financial aid loans, all of which she was currently paying back. For the last three summers, she funded her own master's classes and dumped whatever dollars she had left into keeping old Bessy running. The vintage 1966 Ford Mustang was her first and only car. At sixteen, she spent her entire savings on its purchase, hoping to draw a little attention when she pulled into the high school parking lot. Namely the attention of Buck Monroe. His rebel attitude, tight fitting jeans and sleeveless t-shirts had excited her. But he never noticed her or the car until three weeks ago when Old Bessy was towed into his auto shop. The cost of repairs he quoted was more than she could afford and she sold it to him on the spot for a fraction of its worth. That small amount of money was the beginning of her new car savings. She hoped that over the next year she could build up enough money to buy something sensible, because Henry Hewitt, the accountant, raised his children on the ideal that money is only borrowed for higher education and a mortgage. "If you don't have the cash, you can't afford it," he would tell his daughters.

Audrey closed the refrigerator door and handed Emma a paper plate. "Here you go."

"Thanks," Emma said and took the plate with a hamburger, beans and fruit salad on it. She looked for a place to set it. Nearly every inch of the dark slab, granite counter top was covered with plates of half-eaten food, empty chip bowls, beer bottles, and lipstick kissed margarita glasses. Emma moved her bag from the barstool at the island and settled in while Audrey pulled the mayonnaise and ketchup out for her. She dressed her cold hamburger before biting into the thick grilled meat.

"Sooo, how's the roommate situation working out?" Audrey asked, reaching for a pile of used paper plates and stacking them in the garbage can.

Emma shrugged. "Fine, I guess."

"Well, that's quite an answer for someone who's rooming with her heartthrob," Audrey

snickered.

“Seth is not my heartthrob.” Emma wondered when Audrey would ever let it go that she’d been smitten with Seth at first meeting all those years ago, when her roommate Stacy dragged him into their dorm room.

“Have Mom and Dad gotten over you rooming with a guy yet?” Audrey asked, her smile playful.

Emma shook her head as she took another bite of her hamburger. It wasn’t just her parents that had a conservative view on her roommate. Emma was also uneasy about the whole arrangement. Living with a guy, even if it was just Seth, was different from having a female roommate. She would have declined the offer to occupy his spare bedroom except for the fact that she couldn’t afford rent on her own and his apartment was walking distance to the school.

“Is he still in California?” Audrey asked over her shoulder.

Emma nodded. Seth worked for a consulting firm based in Portland and traveled to projects up and down the west coast. With his work schedule, Emma scarcely had a roommate at all.

“When does he get back?”

“Tonight,” Emma choked out as she swallowed her bite. She reached for her sister’s margarita glass and took a sip to wash down the dry meat. Emma winced as she set the glass back down, “Geez, Aud, did you forget to add the mix to this stuff?” Her eyes were about to tear up when her sister whipped around to look at her, eyebrows knitted together. Audrey looked angry, but then she smiled.

“Living with Mom and Dad has made you soft hasn’t it? You’ve forgotten what a real drink tastes like.”

It was true, liquor of any kind made a rare appearance at the farm in Orchard Creek. Their mother, Lucille, the daughter of an alcoholic and abusive man, would wring her hands with anxiety at the sight of an open container. It had been a while since Emma had had a real drink, but still Audrey’s was potent.

Audrey snatched her glass away from Emma's reach. "What are you doing stealing my drink anyway?" Audrey tipped her glass to take another drink and set it down near the sink. "I'll mix one for you."

"No thanks," Emma replied. "I've had my quota for the night. Do you have any soda?" Emma could use the shot of caffeine. She'd been pulling twelve-hour days since she was hired ten days ago and it was all catching up to her. She could feel the exhaustion in her every move.

"Sure, there's plenty out in the cooler." Audrey pointed to the patio. Emma picked up her plate and carried it outside. The evening air felt fresh as the coolness of the night rolled in. She reached beneath the layer of melting ice for a red can of soda and found an empty seat at the patio table next to Finn.

The men talked about fishing, retelling their best "it-was-this-big" stories, the distance between their hands grew each time they told a tale. Emma sat quietly among them as she devoured her dinner and listened to their banter. She loved to hear Finn's stories about pike fishing in the rivers back home in Ireland, not because she was a fishing aficionado, but because of his deep Irish drawl, which thickened with each beer he drank. He used words like angler and lough, which meant nothing to Emma, but it didn't matter, she loved to listen to him talk. His fierce green eyes were all a twinkle and his dimpled cheeks flushed with excitement as he regaled a tale about reeling in the biggest fish of his life. His hands gestured and mimicked the reeling motion. The men cheered as he finished his story and told of his triumph.

Emma popped her last bite into her mouth when Audrey walked out from the kitchen, margarita in hand. Coming to stand behind her husband, she settled her free arm on his shoulder and let her hand caress his chest. She whispered something in his ear that even Emma couldn't hear, but his green eyes smiled as he lifted his chin and kissed her. Audrey patted him on the chest before walking out to the lawn, to join the other women and watch the children.

Emma watched her walk away, hips swaying slightly. Audrey, her big sister, was so lucky. She had the most adoring and perfect husband, two beautiful daughters, a beautiful home and a successful run in her career. She was taking an extended leave of absence from her job to stay at

home and raise her children. All of her life Emma had been in awe of her sister, who exuded perfection.

A mob of screaming little girls chased two seven or eight year old blond boys. They ran along the heavily treed line of the backyard, behind the garden shed and through the swing set, setting the two yellow-seated swings in motion. Out on the freshly cut lawn Emma saw her niece Lauren, barely twelve months olds, toddling behind her big sister Chelsea, who was all of three years old now. Try as she might, little Lauren couldn't keep up. She tripped over her own feet, falling forward into the grass. The tiny blades assaulted her soft rounded cheeks with their prickly pokes and she let out a wail of distress. Audrey picked her up and dried her tears. A second later, Lauren squirmed out of her mother's arms to join her sister in the chase once again and tried desperately to keep up despite her unsteady steps.

Emma wondered if Lauren would always try to keep up with Chelsea the way she tried to keep up with Audrey. As children, Emma remembered following her sister around relentlessly trying to emulate everything she did, hoping to glean at least a little bit of her sister's perfection.

As much as Emma tried not to compare herself to her sister, she never could escape their obvious differences. Audrey was two years older, two inches taller, two dresses sizes smaller, and her hair was two shades darker, a rich chestnut color while Emma's was brown, plain old brown hair. Audrey's eyes were a deep rich chocolate brown, while Emma's were lighter, more like the color of rust found at the bottom of an old metal bucket.

It seemed that in everything Audrey did she excelled. In high school, she was a straight A student and star player on the girls' basketball team. Her picture made the front page of the Central Valley Times nearly every week. Emma hadn't inherited the athletic gene and stuck to her love of music. She'd been an accomplished clarinet player in the high school band, but no one ever featured her on the front pages of the newspaper for her concert solos.

Emma didn't resent her sister, she only wished for a life as charmed as hers. Someday Emma hoped to have a husband as wonderful as Finn, who was easily better looking than any man Emma had ever dated. None of them—except maybe for Seth, but he didn't count because