

98,347 words

THE OAK TREE

By Julie Judish

Prologue

Director of Security Sarah Johnson flipped through the photos, eyeing them intently. She paused at the third one in the stack, intrigued by the young woman in the picture. She had an average height, average weight, average brown hair and brown eyes. The girl was dressed casually, not flashy like some teens did these days. No rips or tears in the clothing were visible; everything was properly modest and covered. There was no extra skin showing above the waistline as was common with teenage girls. There were no tattoos, no visible body piercing beyond the one stud in each ear, and no shocking green, blue or purple hair. Nothing stood out about the girl who was the target of her scrutiny. As she continued with the rest of the photos, she saw the same girl in various places, with different people. The girl seemed happy. Not joyous, but happy, as if the world was okay around her. She was at the mall shopping with friends, getting on the bus to go to high school, getting in an older model beat up station wagon with her mother and walking into a church. This girl was just... ordinarily; happy.

“Did she see you? Does she suspect?” she asked the two men who were standing in her office.

Dressed in black suits, black ties, sunglasses, and with ear-pieces visible if one would closely look for them, the men could easily be on the cover of “SPY” magazine. This assignment was not their first, and the taller of the two, Roberts, frowned his annoyance.

“No, Director. These photos were all taken within the week as you requested. She never saw us, I am sure of it.”

Director Johnson finished viewing the photos and slipped them back into the large manila envelope the men had supplied them in. She knew what she had to do now would forever change the course of this ordinary girl’s life. She didn’t like that idea. Being normal was a blessing, a benefit, and an advantage. Once she set into motion the next phase of the plan, this girl would never be normal again. Yet the Director had no doubt at all that it had to be done, and the girl must be protected at all costs. The very innocence and normalcy the girl exhibited were her own worst enemy in light of the future she would have. It was Director Johnson’s highest priority to see that this girl live long enough to embark on that future. The young woman’s life was in danger, and if her agents were right, as the Director knew they were, the girl wasn’t aware of it.

“Thank you for getting these to me. Things look just about as I expected, from what little I knew of Miss Becker’s situation. I need you two to select a security team. Six agents should do. I want around the clock surveillance on the home, the school, and anywhere else she goes. Do not be seen. That will come later. We have two weeks until she becomes of age. The people who are threatening her life have implied she will not make that birthday. We need to make sure they are wrong, and see that the girl lives to make her future happen.” The men nodded. Director Johnson continued, “I assume from your surveillance that you are aware of the area and will watch for anything out of the ordinary-“

Roberts lifted his hand, palm towards her as if to stop her, and frowned at her.

“Director, we know how to do our jobs. We will arrange the team of agents immediately and the girl will be safe and sound.”

Director Johnson, tall and poised, looked at her two best agents, and knew they would. She wasn't concerned about the frown from Agent Roberts. Nor was she concerned at the offended look from the other man, Agent Diaz. She remembered that old adage her mother and many, many other mothers over the years have used, that said if you frown long enough, your face will freeze that way. Looking at Agents Roberts and Diaz, she was sure that that was what had happened to these two, but they knew their job -- were the best at it -- and she was confident that Miss Becker was in good hands. She smiled just a bit to herself. She was stalling. They wanted to get to work, and knew she was stalling.

Another heavy sigh. She smoothed down her immaculately tailored skirt and picked an imaginary speck of lint off her jacket.

"All right, let's get to it. I want to hear from someone every four hours."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Roberts nodded to Diaz, and they turned and left the room. The Director locked the manila envelope away in her filing cabinet as she watched them leave, and then, seeing the mounds of paperwork waiting for her, tried to get back to work, but there on her desk she spied one photo of the girl who was her current priority. She had left this photo out when she put the rest away. It was the photo that most clearly showed the girl's face. She picked it up and studied it, paperwork forgotten as this young woman once again stole her attention.

"My poor dear," she spoke to the photo. "You have no idea that your life is about to change forever."

Chapter 1

The alarm had been blaring its noxious tone for several seconds before Joanna Arianna Becker came out of her slumber long enough to reach out one arm from the warm comfort of her bed and bang the snooze button. Just then, the door to her bedroom opened and her mom came breezily into the room.

“Jo, that’s the third time the alarm went off. I know you’re tired but its time to get up!”

Jo sleepily raised herself onto one elbow, pried open one eye and glared at her mom. Last night had been another late night, but today was the last final of her high school career, the very last test she would ever take as a high school student. She had been studying until early in the morning.

“Mom, can I get a ride to school so I can sleep an extra twenty minutes?” Jo’s eyes pleaded with her mom.

Linda Becker shook her head and sighed, “No honey, I’m sorry but I have to be at work in fifteen minutes. Gail called in sick again and I have to work her shift at the market.”

When Jo sat up straight and began to protest, her mother held up her hand, stopping the objection short. “I know what you are going to say, and I promise I won’t be late coming home,” she said, sitting down on the side of the bed to give Jo a big hug. “This is a big night for us that we have been waiting and planning for years. I wouldn’t miss it, you know that!” She gave Jo a quick kiss on the forehead then stood up and walked toward the bedroom door. “Hurry up now, you have forty five minutes to catch the bus, and you can’t miss it! I love you Jo, have a wonderful last day of high school.”

After her mother had closed the door, Jo drug herself out of the warm bed and stood up on the worn carpeting in her bedroom. She got dressed, walked out of her warm room and turned toward the bathroom. She stared at her reflection. At five foot five inches, she was the same height as many girls at her school. She thought she had too many freckles, and wasn’t totally happy with her straight, mid-length brown hair. She sighed, snatched up a hairbrush and began attacking the tangles in her hair as she continued down the hallway to the rest of the house. Well, not really a house. It was a mobile home, single wide, fourteen or so feet across, she supposed. The two bedrooms where she and her mom slept were ample space for the two of them, though. The living room was small but cozy. The carpet was worn badly, same as it was in the bedrooms, but it didn’t bother her. She always tried avoiding looking down anyway, since she detested the orange carpeting which had been installed when the mobile was created, about forty years ago. The kitchen linoleum was coming up in spots, and was cracked in others. The faucet in the kitchen squealed when you used it, but the water ran clear. Most of the cupboards were battered and closed crooked. The pots and pans were chipped and cracked, as were a lot of the dishes. The furniture was dented and scratched in the living room. The small stereo her mom had gotten at a bargain yard sale for two dollars had only one working speaker. The television was a twenty-inch, not a large screen like a lot of her friends’ TVs, but it was home, and comfortable. She had decent clothes, she was warm, her mom was a great cook, and she was happy.

She thought about some of her friends, and their fancy, modern homes. With large yards, big cars, swimming pools and entertainment centers. Sure, it was fun to visit their homes. She had a good time, they hung out, and they swam and goofed off, but she was never ashamed of her mom, or her house, and would invite her friends home with her just as often as she went with

them to theirs. Her mom told her a few times, “Jo, I’m so proud of you, that you aren’t spoiled like most of the kids today, and how you place your value in people, not in money, or things.” Jo was glad that her friends loved her mom, too.

Entering the kitchen, she got a clean glass from one of the cupboards and poured the last of the milk into it. After popping two pieces of bread into the toaster, Jo removed the butter and jam from the refrigerator and then rummaged in a drawer for a pencil. On the front of the refrigerator was a piece of paper with a shopping list. She added “milk” to the list that already contained “flour, sugar, eggs, hamburger, and tomato paste”.

Toast and milk were staples for breakfast, and she ate them as she sat at the kitchen table, staring out the window into the mobile home park. She saw her neighbor, Mrs. Harper, coming out of her mobile and getting into her car. Mrs. Harper worked as a cashier at a variety store near the supermarket that Jo’s mom worked at, also as a cashier. Beyond Mrs. Harper’s place, she saw young Mrs. Chambers coming out of her home with her baby in her arms. *They must be going for their morning stroll*, Jo concluded. When the stroller opened up and the baby was placed inside, she knew she was right. It was nice to see everyday things happen every day. Jo smiled. She was pretty sure that next she would see the twins, Bob and Mickey, from the other side of the mobile park running by to their bus stop. Their bus came about ten minutes before hers did. It was always her personal alarm clock to see those two go by. When they did, she knew she had to hustle. She cleaned up, grabbed an apple to stuff in her backpack, and closed the fridge door just as she saw the two little boys run past the window.

Back in her room she donned her tennis shoes quickly and grabbed her backpack making sure her keys to the house were in it, and then grabbed her cell phone -- the one luxury she and her mom scrimped and saved to be able to have for them both. She locked up the house and headed down the road out of the park to the bus stop.

As she rounded the last corner to the exit of the park, she looked for the car she’d seen there a few times in the last couple of weeks. Yes, there it was. A black sedan with tinted windows, sitting across the main road and up about two hundred feet. There were a few scattered houses on that side of the street, but the car seemed to be between them, not in front of any particular one. She’d never seen anyone get into or out of it; it seemed to be empty. It was hard to tell though, with the windows so black. She looked up the long straight road for the bus and, not seeing it, decided to go look at the license plate of the black car. She ran across the otherwise deserted road and walked nonchalantly toward the vehicle. As she got closer she could just make out the license plate. It wasn’t a California license plate, she was sure. Even from this distance she could tell the colors were wrong. As she got close enough to start making out the numbers and letters, she could tell there was no “e” or “GOV” that would make it a state or government vehicle. She considered going closer to determine which state it was from when she saw the bus heading her way from up the road. She dashed back across the main road and hurried back to the bus stop. She was NOT going to miss that bus. The car was probably just someone visiting a relative in one of the houses on the other side of the road, and she wasn’t going to worry about it anymore.

Her excitement was displayed in her wide smile as she boarded the bus a few seconds later and found a seat next to her two best friends, Charlie and Alex. Charlie Allen, whose given name was Charlene, was petite, slim, and always decked out in the latest styles. Pretty, outgoing, and constantly chattering, Charlie was the life of the team. However, she often got the other two in trouble when she said the wrong thing at the wrong time. She was very literal, and did not know the meaning of the word “discreet.” Alexis Turner, nicknamed Alex, was tall and slender

and relaxed. She was one of a small minority of African American kids in their community, but Alex's skin color had never bothered Jo. Jeans and a T-shirt was the only wardrobe Jo had ever seen her in. Alex was in all the advanced classes at school and excelled in Math and Science. The two friends were as different as could be; yet today they were bubbly and giddy as Jo sat next to them.

"Jo! Today is the last day of childhood! After today we go forth as educated women of the world!" Charlie was bursting with excitement.

Alex was a little calmer, "Jo, are you staying after school to finish setting up for the sober grad party tonight?"

"Yes," Jo answered, "Aren't you staying too?"

"Yep, I was wondering if you needed a ride home."

Jo saw that Alex was grinning ear to ear, and exclaimed, "You got it?"

Alex nodded her head. "It's perfect, Jo! It's a royal blue color, the seats are charcoal gray, the interior has been totally redone, and it is exactly what I wanted! My dad gave me the keys last night, and told me he was proud of his little girl, and now I am the proud owner of a classic Mustang! My dad is bringing it to school later; he had to get the insurance and title stuff done today with it. I am so excited!"

"I can't tell, Alex," Jo replied sarcastically. "Wow, you got a car for a graduation gift! That is just incredible!" Jo had not a twinge of jealousy in her, knowing what a wonderful thing this was for Alex. She knew Alex would pick up her and Charlie often, and the three of them would have a lot more freedom. She was truly happy for Alex, and hugged her enthusiastically. "Yes, I would love a ride home after the set-up. We won't have a lot of time to get ready for graduation, but it won't take long because we will be so excited."

"How much time do we need anyway?" Charlie interrupted. "Just the cap and gown on top of the mid length dress. Simple, elegant, and -- oh I can hardly wait!"

Jo smiled at her friends, and sat back in the small bus seat with them as much as she could. The seat was too small for three to fit comfortably anymore. The bus ride the rest of the way to school was filled with talk of the party, graduation, and Alex's new car. Excitement was in the air and the weather was perfect as they filed off the bus. It was a glorious day, and she was thrilled.

Once at school, the three friends split up and headed to their last two classes. This high school split up the finals week, making each of the six normal periods last half a day. This was the last day of two, two-hour period finals. Today Jo would tackle physics, one of the hardest classes she had had this year. She would be seeing Alex there, since they were in it together, but first she headed to the Attendance office where she was an aide fifth period, and so had a two-hour break from academics. She knew there was a lot of final paperwork and filing to be done for the end of the school year, and was planning on being busy the whole two hours.

Just as she got to the door of the attendance office and grabbed the handle to open it, out of the corner of her eye she saw a black sedan pull up and park in the teachers parking area. It was far away, so she couldn't be sure if it was the same one, she just thought it was odd to see it there. Maybe a teacher was running late but she didn't remember any black cars ever parking in the teacher's parking area that resembled the one she had seen repeatedly near her home. It was probably just a coincidence. She shrugged and went on into the building.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Jo filed until her fingers were sore, calmed worried relatives on the telephone regarding the time for the ceremony that evening, found a missing class ring in the lost-and-found for a fellow senior, and made herself useful as usual. The physics

test she had studied for was hard, but she was ready, and in the end, felt she had done well. Then it was over and she could sit back and sigh in relief. Done. Finished. All that was left of her time at Central High would be excitement and laughter and fun! Sure there would be some heartache and tears, knowing she would probably not see most of her classmates again, and some of them never. A few were going into the military immediately. Many were going on to various colleges and universities. Some, like Jo, would go directly into the workforce. She wasn't exactly sure where she would try to get a job at first. Her mom had told her several times she could come to work at the supermarket with her. Jo considered that to be her fallback job. She wanted to get something on her own, something that she could do as her own person. Besides, as much as she loved her mom, she didn't want to work with her all day then be home with her all day. People need their space.

It was there, lounging at a picnic bench outside the school cafeteria pondering her future that Alex and Charlie found her a few minutes later.

"Jo! There you are! Lets get this party ready and then we can go out for a soda before I take you home," Alex was always the responsible one. The girls headed into the gym where the festivities were headquartered, and asked for instructions. They were assigned outdoors, setting up a water balloon fight area, and it looked like it would be a blast!

They walked through one of the wings of the English department, and outside, at the end of the corridor, they found a small wading pool filled with water. There were several bags of water balloons, a hose with a tiny adapter on it to fill the balloons, and on the ground, lines and sections divided off for the game. The three girls began filling balloons, tying them off, and placing them in the water-filled wading pool. After thirty or so balloons, Charlie was clumsy and dropped one, it splattered all over Jo, and that's how the water fight began. They wasted every balloon they had already filled, even filled a few more. Alex was soaked to the bone after falling into the wading pool, but had acquired several small squirt guns from the table beside the pool that were for the game later. Charlie was dripping wet, armed and dangerous, the last two un-popped water-filled balloons in her hands. Jo was drenched too, but she was no pushover -- and she had the hose. The head of the English department found out just how strong Jo was with that hose when he came out of his classroom at the end of the hall to find out what all the screaming and squealing was about. He got a stream full force right in the face.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry, Mr. Bowen! I didn't see you come out!" Jo stammered as she saw what she had done. Charlie and Alex dropped their weapons and stood up straight. There was no way the three of them could feign innocence, as the evidence of their guilt was dripping from their clothing.

Mr. Bowen was well-known in the school for being able to take a joke, so the girls weren't too worried -- until he barked in a gruff tone, "Hand me that hose, young lady!"

Jo pulled the hose over towards him, worried, a sinking feeling coming over her. Was this going to ruin a perfect day? Was Mr. Bowen going to be angry with them and possibly get them banned from the party later in the evening? She did not expect what happened next.

Mr. Bowen took the hose from her. "Now, get over there with the other two hoodlums."

Jo retreated back to the other side of the wading pool away from Mr. Bowen. The girls looked at each other, wondering what was going to happen. They were definitely no longer laughing.

Then, so slightly that Jo almost missed it, he winked.

He turned towards the building and yelled out, "Ms. Blake, can you come out here for a moment please. These girls seem to be having some trouble."

Realization dawned on the three girls at what was about to happen just seconds before it took place. Ms. Blake, a recently divorced, very good-looking English teacher who occupied the room across the hall from Mr. Bowen, came out of the corridor at his call.

“What seems to be the problem, girls?” That was all she got to say before she was sprayed from head to toe with a jet of water from the hose Mr. Bowen was now in control of.

“Aaaahhh! Help me girls!” Ms. Blake reached for one of the squirt guns floating in the wading pool and gestured to the three friends. They weren’t too sure about getting involved – until Mr. Bowen turned the hose on them.

An hour or so later, all five of them were sitting in chairs around the wading pool, filling up water balloons. After a short fight in which it was four against one, Mr. Bowen had quickly given up and the two adults joined the girls in filling balloons. The two teachers, whom most of the students in the school counted as friends, inquired into what the girls’ plans were after graduation.

Charlie was going to college. Having grown up in the upscale part of town, she wished to see what else the world had to offer her. Her parents, Brad and Mindy Allen, had spoiled her just a bit, in Jo’s opinion, and let her choose whichever college she wished. She chose to go to New York and see the world. She would be leaving in the fall after an exciting last summer in California.

Alex was going to attend the local college and work full time in her parent’s company. Sam and Kendra Turner owned a travel agency, and Alex had been working with them part time since she was sixteen. Though she was raised middle-class, and the Turner family was one of the few African American families in their small town, Alex admitted she had a good life and was looking forward to continuing on as she had been. She liked things to stay the same.

Jo was going to go to work right away even though she had nothing lined up. Mr. Bowen inquired why she wasn’t going to college as well, and Jo explained that there was no money in her family for college.

“My dad died when I was too young to remember him,” she told him. “My mom and I have been doing okay, but I’ve been getting some kind of Social Security or something since his death. Well, that ends when I turn eighteen, so that will cut our current income in half. My mom works hard, but she doesn’t have a college degree. It’s a menial job, so even though they value her work, she still barely makes over minimum wage.” Jo smiled. “It’s been enough though, all these years. My mom’s been great, and we’ve always had food and shelter and clothing, and lots and lots of love.”

“When do you turn eighteen, Jo?” Ms. Blake asked.

“In three days,” Jo replied dreamily. Besides the graduation ceremony, her eighteenth birthday had been the thing she’d been looking forward to the most. She wasn’t exactly sure why, and couldn’t even begin to tell anyone how she felt. It was just a sense that things were going to change for her, a wonderful feeling that her life would begin once she turned eighteen.

The last of the balloons were placed on the huge pile in the wading pool. Ms. Blake and Mr. Bowen wished the girls luck with their futures, and went back to finish setting their classrooms in order for the summer. It was just after four in the afternoon, enough time for a quick ice cream break before they all went home to make themselves ready for graduation. Alex stood up and went to the fence behind where they had been working. This wing of the high school bordered the student parking lot. She gestured to Charlie and Jo.

“Hey, come here and look at my beautiful baby.” Alex pointed out a beautiful blue classic Mustang sitting in the sparsely filled parking lot. Most of the students were gone. Only

those helping with the party preparations were still hanging around. “Let’s go take a ride!” Alex was excited to drive the car for the first time, and especially to share it with her best friends.

“Wait!” Jo stopped Alex and Charlie as they headed toward the corridor to leave. She had seen something that bothered her, out there in the parking lot. Alex and Charlie came back over to the fence.

“What is it Jo? You see your dream car out there?” Charlie asked, trying to see what was important. Jo pointed two rows over from Alex’s car, and gestured to the end.

“See that black car there? The one at the very end of the lot?” Jo asked her two friends. “Have you seen it before?”

Charlie and Alex eyed the vehicle in question. It was so far away; all they could tell was that it was black with tinted windows. From this distance, she couldn’t tell the make or model, even though Alex really knew her cars.

“Come on, Jo, lets get to my car and we can check it out on our way out of the parking lot.” Alex grabbed Jo’s arm and led her toward the corridor. “What’s the big deal about a black car anyway, Jo?”

Jo didn’t answer for a few seconds. She could feel both Alex and Charlie watching her, questioning her. Did she dare tell them what she thought? She looked at Alex, then at Charlie, considering.

“I think someone in that car is following me.”

Chapter 2

By the time the three friends arrived at Alex's new car, the mysterious black sedan had disappeared. Jo told Alex and Charlie about how she'd seen it near her home several times, and earlier in the day pulling into the teacher's parking lot. Since there were so few cars left in the lot, it was easy to see that the car she was concerned about had left. Alex wasn't convinced that the three separate sightings was a coincidence, yet Charlie was all for forgetting about it and going for ice cream. Jo was worried, but decided to put on a brave face and a sturdy smile, and not let this day be ruined. After all, the car was gone; it could have been there by chance.

Alex unlocked the car door of her beautiful new car, and all three exclaimed over this and that in the interior, and the color of the blue as the sunlight hit the exterior. They tried out the stereo of course, and then Alex climbed in behind the wheel, Charlie crawled into the back behind Jo, who piled in beside Alex in the front bucket seat. The car rode smooth, and the girls were having the time of their lives! They went to a local ice cream parlor where they ran into even more senior-classmen from their school. The group chattered about the coming festivities, snacked on ice cream and sodas, and realized for the first time that many of them would be leaving shortly. Danny and Rob, both huge cut-ups in Physics class, told them about moving to Montana to live and work with Danny's uncle on a ranch. Lindsay was really quiet in class but was talkative and laughing here in this environment. She was going to beauty school to become a licensed beautician. Others talked of their plans after high school and the group as a whole appeared rather nostalgic to see this phase of life come to an end.

At about five o'clock, the group split up to prepare for the graduation ceremony. Because it was scheduled to begin at seven, the graduates were asked to be in the auditorium by six thirty sharp, with their caps and gowns on. Alex dropped Charlie off at her home on the way to Jo's. Charlie leaped out of the car and danced to her front door yelling and shouting, "We are graduating in one hour!" Alex and Jo both whooped and hollered with her as they pulled away.

Once the two girls were alone, Alex brought up the black car again.

"Jo, when did you say you saw the car the first time?"

She thought for a minute. "I don't remember if it was Tuesday or Wednesday last week, but it was last week. It just sat across the street, in between two of the homes on that side."

Alex seemed lost in thought, and Jo, feeling rather foolish after the car was gone, decided that there were too many wonderful things happening today to worry about a strange car.

"Alex, I want you to stop speculating about what this car means or doesn't mean. We are graduating tonight; this is what we have worked thirteen years for! Come on, drop the worried frown, and stop furrowing your eyebrows. Just forget about the car. It is nothing, I'm positive! I was just imagining things. There's no way that anyone would want to follow me! I am extremely uninteresting!" They both chuckled.

"All right, Jo, but if you see the car again, promise me you will call the police and report it. Maybe your life is boring, but you are smart and pretty, and there are definitely psychos out in the world. Will you promise?"

Alex eyed Jo to see if she was being taken seriously. Jo nodded agreement. "Yes, I promise I will call the police if I see it again."

Alex turned into the mobile home park and drove down the road that led to Jo's house. She stopped in front and Jo got out, thanking Alex for the ride, and again complimenting and congratulating Alex on the beautiful car. They waved, and Alex sped off toward home.

Jo pulled her keys from her backpack and was just inserting them into the lock when it turned in her hands and the door opened. Her mom had made it home from work early, to make sure she was there for Jo's big evening. The two hugged tight.

"My little girl is graduating!" She mumbled in Jo's hair. Jo could hear the sadness in her mom's voice, and pulled away from her shoulder to gaze into her face.

"Mom, have you been crying?"

"It's a mother's right to get all emotional at a time like this." She smiled as she answered. "I'm so proud of you sweetheart." Another quick hug and her mom let go.

"There isn't much time before we leave. I have a sandwich ready for you, and then we need to get you dressed. I would love to help you with your hair, if you want me to."

It dawned on Jo then that she hadn't seen her mom's car outside. "Mom, where's the car?" she asked.

Her mother's smile faded, and she sighed. "Broke down at the market. It wouldn't start when I was leaving to come home. I'm not sure how I'm going to pay for the repairs this time."

"But mom, how did you get home?"

"Oh, you won't believe it!" She laughed. "Our neighbor, Mrs. Harper had run in for milk on her way home, isn't that just incredible! I know she works close by, but had no idea when she would be off, or if I could even get hold of her. To tell you the truth, I hadn't realized I was broke down more than a few minutes before I saw her leaving the market. I hadn't even begun to try to figure out what to do next before the answer just showed up! It was just a wonderful coincidence."

Panic was beginning to set in. Jo could feel the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. She could feel the tingling in the back of her head. Why, oh why today. This was supposed to be perfect! This was a once in a lifetime day! Why now? But she was able to remain calm as she asked her mom, "Mom, Mom listen this is important. How are we getting back to the high school for the graduation ceremony?"

Her mother glanced up at Jo's face, and immediately saw her daughter's anxiety. She placed one hand on Jo's shoulder.

"Jo, honey, calm down. It's all been arranged. I told Mrs. Harper what my problem was about tonight as we were driving home. Well, as it so happens, her great-nephew is graduating tonight as well. She will be going to the high school just as we are, and of course she is happy to take us with her. She even agreed to go early so you can get into the auditorium when you need to be there." Her mother smiled at Jo's sigh of relief. "Tonight will be perfect, just as you had always dreamed!"

Jo allowed her mom to lead her into the kitchen as she chattered about the day's events and devoured the sandwich her mom had left for her. The mother laughed through Jo's description of the water fight with her and her two friends and the two English teachers. Jo finished eating and quickly went to her room to change. While she was getting ready, she asked, "Mom, the sober grad party won't be over until one o'clock or so. Since you can't come pick me up, can I call Alex and see if I can go home with her afterwards? She has a car, by the way. She got it today as a graduation gift!" She briefly described the car to her mom. "I'm sure she will have it there, and then we can go back to her house when we get tired. Would that be ok?"

"Yes, that would work perfectly. I can't see asking Mrs. Harper to drive back to the high school at that time in the morning," she chuckled.

Jo fastened the last button on her dress, and reached for the phone to call Alex. After explaining to Alex about the defective car, and their transportation to the high school, Alex readily agreed to have Jo spend the night. “Yes, let’s do it!” was Alex’s reply.

She had her dress, nylons and shoes on, her hair was shimmering, and her cap and gown were lying on the bed. Everything was ready. Jo watched her mom come into the room, smiling secretly, and wondered what her mom had up her sleeve.

“Jo, I know you and I have sacrificed a lot over the years. Money has always been tight. You haven’t had most of the things you wanted, or some of the things you needed, but tonight is special. I have been saving for this night for about four years. And now, I have something for you, to honor you tonight.”

Jo watched as her worn, tired mother handed her a small oblong box, tied with a ribbon. It looked like a box that would contain jewelry, but her mom had never been frivolous like that before. Jo glanced up to see tears shimmering in her mother’s eyes. “Open it, honey. I really want you to have it.”

Jo opened the shiny white box to reveal a set of beautiful diamond earrings in the shape of a teardrop, and a matching pendant on a gold chain. She drew in her breath sharply; she was stunned. “Mom, these are beautiful! Are you sure we can afford them?”

Through her tears, the mother nodded, and said, “Yes, Jo. I wanted you to have a token, a memento of this night. We have weathered a lot together, sweetheart. Now, soon you will be a woman, legally, but you have already grown into the most beautiful, wonderful woman I know. And I am so very proud of you!”

Jo hugged her mom and squealed over the beauty of the gift. She asked her mom to help her put on the necklace, and then Jo put the earrings in. She looked in the mirror to see the completed picture, and felt like a million dollars. Her smile lit up the room, and Linda Becker was pleased.

It was time to go. Mother and daughter locked the door of the mobile and walked the few steps to Mrs. Harper’s car. Their officious neighbor was just stepping off her porch, and she stopped and looked at Jo. “My, what a beautiful young woman! Congratulations on your graduation, Jo. I’m so pleased I can help in this small way.” They all got in the car, Jo in the back of course, and left for the high school. On the way, Mrs. Harper inquired about the broken car, and then the two women in front filled the rest of the drive with small talk. Jo didn’t even attempt to follow the conversation around her. Her mind was on the evening. She was nervous. The same fears that every high school girl feels as the ceremony approaches also dogged Jo: *will I trip as I walk across the stage?*

After parking, and one last hug from her mom, Jo hurried to the high school gym, which was the staging area for the graduates. The building was flooded with caps and gowns, and excited seniors. Jo found Alex and Charlie waiting for her near the side of the room. Charlie, of course, noticed the diamonds immediately.

“Jo! Those are just gorgeous!” She delicately lifted the pendant to get a closer look.

“My mom totally surprised me with them; I had no idea at all.” Jo explained. “I’m sure she skipped a lot of lunches to get this for me, and I love her for it.” Jo smiled. Alex and Charlie both knew how little luxury there was in their friend’s life, and were happy for her.

“So, Charlie. Alex got a car, I got diamonds. What are your parents doing for you for graduation?” Jo asked.

Charlie grinned ear to ear. “Well, since I’m going to New York in the fall for college, Daddy decided we all needed to go there for a vacation, so I could get acquainted with the city.

He sprung this on me this afternoon! We are leaving day after tomorrow for New York! He wants me to look for an apartment now, so I get one that's close to the University, and in a good area."

Jo's face fell. 'Day after tomorrow' meant she didn't get to spend her birthday with one of her best friends. She sighed, and quickly plastered her smile back on. This was a wonderful opportunity for Charlie, and Jo didn't want to be selfish by wishing it were a different time. No, Charlie didn't need to see how hurt she was. Jo glanced up at Alex, thankful that Alex would be around to have a fantastic day with. Alex saw the look, and commiserated with Jo. With their eyes they agreed not to bring up the forgotten birthday to Charlie, and just be happy for her. Charlie was babbling about the plans, when the flight left, which airports they were doing layovers in, which motel they would stay at, etc., and never noticed Jo's momentary sadness, for which Jo was grateful.

"That's wonderful, Charlie," Jo said, "Take lots of pictures, we want to see where you will be living!" Jo really meant it, too.

Soon Vice-Principal Smith was asking for everyone's attention. He requested the graduates get in a line in the order they had practiced earlier in the day. A hush fell over the crowd as it dawned on them the significance of the next few hours, and they lined up quietly and nervously. Jo was between Alex and Charlie in line, and they would be sitting together for the ceremony. Once all the graduates were in place, Mr. Smith led the students to the auditorium. At the entrance, the girl at the head of the line paused, and waited for "Pomp and Circumstance" to begin. Then they all apprehensively yet proudly marched to their respective seats.

There were several speeches that followed. The Principal, Mr. Wright, congratulated the students on a job well done, and encouraged them to follow their dreams. One of the teachers gave some hilarious anecdotes regarding things the students had done or said over their four years in that school, and wished them well in their future. The last two speeches were from two of the senior class. Their words both moved and inspired their classmates. The procession of the graduates concluded without fault; not one person tripped, no one tried to accept their diploma with the wrong hand, and all students stood and sat together as they practiced. It was beautiful. It was flawless. Jo clutched her diploma to her chest and smiled so big she was sure her mouth would split wide open. Then Mr. Wright announced the graduating class of 2010, and total chaos and mayhem erupted as students tossed their caps into the air, leapt for joy, and cheered.

Following the recession, Jo found her mom searching for her in the crushing mob. They hugged, and cried. "Jo, sweetie, I love you so much, and I am so proud of you!"

"I know, Mom. I love you!"

Charlie and Alex came up then to give hugs to Jo's mom, and there were hugs all around from Charlie's parents, Brad and Mindy Allen, then more hugs from Sam and Kendra Turner, Alex's parents. Finally, with a last hug and a wave, Jo left her mom in the care of their neighbor and the three girls left for the sober grad party.

"We are graduates! High school graduates!" Charlie was ecstatic. She was dancing and leaping as she led the way to the building where the party was starting. Jo and Alex laughed with her, and allowed themselves to be dragged along by their energetic friend. They went to the girl's locker room to change into jeans and T-shirts before they entered into the fun.

The party was a complete success. There were gifts for each of the graduates from the community, collected by a very active Parents' Club. There were games and small prizes for each game. There were unlimited sodas, candy, pizza, hamburgers, hot dogs, and every other kind of junk food teenagers love. The three girls went to check out the water balloon game they

had helped with earlier that day, and got caught off-guard by a few of the boys that were there already. Alex got hit in the legs, and instantly drenched. Charlie saw what was going on, and squealing, turned to run away, and was beamed in her side. Jo took a balloon in the chest, and it splattered all over her.

“Oops,” Danny from Physics class apologized, “I’m sorry Jo, I didn’t mean for it to hit there.” He grinned sheepishly.

“Sure you didn’t.” Jo laughed. Then she nodded to Alex and Charlie, and they grabbed a balloon in each hand. Danny and Rob, the other boy who was on the offensive, were outnumbered, and it didn’t take long for them to jokingly cry “uncle.” Laughing, the girls left them, dripping wet, and went to get some food.

It was a warm evening, so getting wet actually felt good. They went from station to station, trying the games, working puzzles, solving math equations in one place, and having a blast. Charlie was imbibing too much caffeine in Alex’s opinion, but Charlie just laughed and drank another. After several hours of play, the girls began to tire.

“Girls, I think the caffeine buzz is wearing off,” Charlie informed them. “I’m pooped. I’m gonna call my mom for a ride. How much longer are you staying?”

“Not much longer. Jo’s coming home with me. Her mom’s car broke down so she doesn’t have a ride home. I think we’ll head out when you do.”

Charlie pouted. “Why wasn’t I invited?”

Alex sighed, “It was a last minute thing, Charlie. Jo didn’t have a way home, and since we knew we would be late, she asked if she could sleep at my place and get a ride home in the morning.”

“Oh. Ok.” Charlie thought about that for a minute. “Well, can I crash at your place too? Let’s have one last sleepover before I go off to college!”

Jo didn’t want to be the cause of any jealousy, so she quickly spoke up, “Yeah, Alex, lets both go home with you. Then Charlie’s parents won’t have to come get her either, and tomorrow we can hang out all day or something. It will be fun!”

“Ok, Charlie. Call your mom and tell her, and we will go to my house and sleep. I’m ready. It’s been a long day.”

After Charlie made a quick phone call, the girls collected their stuff: the graduation attire, the prizes and gifts they had received, and a few sodas for the road, then went to the student parking lot to get in Alex’s car for the trip home.

The parking lot was well lit, and a lot of students were milling around, saying good-byes to friends. Alex and Jo hugged several girls they knew from a class or two, and Charlie hugged a few of the boys. Alex and Jo looked at each other and laughed. Charlie would never change, they agreed, as they got into Alex’s car and headed out of the parking lot. At the stop sign leaving the school, as Alex was turning onto the main road heading home, she heard Jo’s sharp intake of breath. She quickly looked over and saw Jo staring off at the parking lot where they had just left. Following the direction Jo was looking, Alex turned to see what it was. Then she saw it. The black car with tinted windows. It looked exactly like the one they had seen earlier in the day, and it was backing out of its space to leave, as if to follow them.

Chapter 3

Jo wanted Alex to leave, but at the same time, didn't want that black car to follow them. She looked around quickly for other friends, other cars, anyone to help. There were a few other seniors getting into cars, preparing to leave, but none close enough to block the black sedan. She saw Alex was pausing too, and searching the lot, as if thinking the same thoughts. Suddenly from the far side of the parking lot, totally opposite where the black car had parked, a small sporty car with a couple in it sped up behind Alex. At the same time and just as quickly, an older model large luxury car pulled too quickly and too sharply into the parking entrance from the main road and lost control. Barely missing Alex's car, the long vehicle smashed into the sports car's rear bumper at a forty-five degree angle, totally blocking the entrance to the parking lot. The exit lane, containing the sports car, was now blocked as well, since the occupants exited their vehicle to have it out with the "gramps" driving the luxury car. That gentleman got out of his vehicle, too, and the girls saw that everyone involved was fine. At a nod from Jo, Alex made hasty their escape. Jo laughed, relieved, as they hit the open road towards Alex's house, and Alex smiled.

"What a perfect time for them to have an accident," Alex was the first to acknowledge their escape.

"I'm sorry that had to happen," Jo nodded in agreement, "But since it did, I'm glad it was right then."

Charlie, completely oblivious to the presence of the black car, sat in the back seat staring dumbfounded at her two friends. "What horrible things to say! I am ashamed of you two!" Jo and Alex burst out laughing. Charlie folded her arms and pouted the rest of the trip.

Totally exhausted, the three girls arrived at Alex's home and climbed into their respective beds, couches, and sleeping bags, and quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, after a long rest, the girls awoke to hot breakfast that Alex's mom had prepared for them -- pancakes, warm maple syrup, bacon, and scrambled eggs. The girls ate ravenously. "Partying all evening makes you hungry," Charlie noted. Once breakfast was finished, the girls quickly helped to put the kitchen back in order, and then they headed to Charlie's house to help her pack for New York.

"I really wish you didn't have to go so soon, Charlie," Jo sighed. "I wish you could just wait a few days."

"Silly Jo! I won't be gone the whole summer! Just three weeks. I will be back before you even miss me, I promise!" Charlie still hadn't remembered her birthday, Jo realized, and she refused to bring it up. It would seem as if she was being petty, or as if she just wanted Charlie around to give her a gift or something. It would be the first time since grade school that the three of them didn't celebrate one of their birthdays together. Jo noticed Alex smiling sadly at her. Alex did remember, and Alex, too, had decided it best not to remind Charlie what she would be missing when she left. Jo sighed. *This is what growing up means*, she concluded.

It was early afternoon when the packing was finished. One of the servants in the Allen's home knocked on the door of Charlie's bedroom and announced lunch was being served on the terrace, so they headed downstairs to another meal together. Delicate sandwiches with the crusts removed from the bread, small bowls of watercress salad, a dish of fresh sliced fruits, and ice cold, freshly brewed tea were gratefully consumed. The girls laughed and joked about moving from one house to the next for food.

"I guess dinner is at your house, Jo!" Charlie giggled.

Jo laughed, too, “Yep, I think mom is making soup tonight, you should all come over.”

Honestly, Jo had no idea what her mom was making for dinner, but soup was a common occurrence at their house. It was fast and cheap, and both mother and daughter enjoyed it. For that reason, more often than not, soup *was* for dinner.

“I love your mom’s chicken soup, Jo,” Alex responded.

“Let me call her and see when she is getting off work, then we can plan the rest of our last day with Charlie.”

Jo pulled out her cell phone and dialed her mom. The cashiers at the market were discouraged from accepting personal calls during working hours, but Jo knew her mom would return her call on her next break, and planned to leave her a message. She was surprised when her mom answered the phone.

“Hi, honey. How was the party last night?”

“Oh, mom! Hi! I didn’t expect to actually get you,” she laughed. “I was planning on leaving you a message to call me on your next break, but this is better! Oh, and the party was a blast! I will tell you about it later.”

“Oh, good! I’m glad you had a good time. What were you going to leave me a message about?”

“Alex, Charlie and I are crashing the house for dinner. Is that okay? And Alex wanted to know if you are by any chance fixing chicken soup.” Jo grinned as Alex tried to wave her a warning not to ask that. Jo’s mom loved that Alex and Charlie liked coming over even though the house was old and ugly. She always told her daughter that people who judged other people by their possessions weren’t worth knowing. It was nice to know her mom liked her friends, and vice versa.

“Yes, I’m sure that can be arranged. Are the girls sleeping over too?” her mom asked.

Jo quickly pulled the phone away from her ear for a moment to ask the girls, “Mom wants to know if you are sleeping over, or just pigging out.”

Jo’s mom could be heard over the phone yelling, “I didn’t say that!” Alex and Charlie laughed.

“No, I can’t. We are leaving early tomorrow for the airport. I’m sure my parents want me at home.” Charlie sighed. “But I want to when we get back.”

“I can’t either. Dad said I had today off since we were out so late, but he wants me to take a shift at the travel agency tomorrow, and I have to open, so it’s going to be early, but Charlie and I definitely will crash at your place after she gets back, and I might while she’s gone.”

Jo put the phone back to her ear, “No, mom, not sleeping, just pigging out.” She smiled at her friends’ glares of exasperation.

“Ok, I will be off early anyway, and it’s fine that the girls can’t sleep over. I took the next two days off to be with *my* girl. I need to talk to you tomorrow about some things.”

Jo raised her eyebrows in question, “Should I be worried?”

“No, honey, its just some things I need to tell you, now that you are turning eighteen. I’ve been putting it off, and I can’t put it off any longer.”

Jo smiled, and chuckled, “Mom, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I already know about the ‘birds and the bees.’ We had that conversation years ago.”

“No, Jo, not about that.” She could hear the smile in her mom’s voice, and was relieved to know that whatever it was, it was not a bad thing.

“My break is almost over, Jo, so I need to get back to work. Bring the girls over whenever; I will put the soup on as soon as I get home.”

“Love you, mom!” Jo listened to her mother echo the words, and then she hung up. “It’s chicken soup tonight, and I’m ordered to bring you piggies along!”

Alex and Charlie pretended to get angry with Jo for that comment and they chased each other around the terrace like small children, laughing and shouting, and trying to avoid falling in the swimming pool. Finally Jo stopped running, breathless, and let the other two catch her and pummel her gently. Then they all collapsed on the carefully manicured lawn and did some cloud gazing. Jo pointed out a bunny with a huge cottontail. Charlie found a puppy that was long and skinny. Alex saw a science beaker filled with a mysterious fluid. Jo and Charlie laughed at that; Alex was always way too serious.

The next few hours the three best friends hung out in town. They did some clothes shopping with Charlie, Alex dragged them through a technology store, and Jo wanted to check out the bookstore. Shopped out, they headed to Jo’s house. As they neared the mobile home park, Jo glanced at the spot across the street where the black car had been yesterday to see if it was there still. No, it was gone. She’d been trying hard not to think about that black car, and had succeeded most of the day. She wished she could just forget about it.

The house smelled like chicken soup when they entered. Jo had noticed her mom’s car parked outside the trailer, and mentioned it after she put down her backpack and other things that she had been hanging on to since the party the night before.

“Mom, you got the car fixed?” she asked as she entered the kitchen and gave her mom a quick peck on the cheek.

“Well, it’s the funniest thing. Today, the car started just fine. Mrs. Harper gave me a ride in to work today, and when I was ready to come home, I decided to just try it, and it started right up. I have no idea what is wrong with it now, but I just drove home and thanked God.”

Jo gave her mom a hug. “I’m glad it’s working, too, mom.”

Jo led Alex and Charlie into her room, and she put away the dress and things from the graduation the previous evening. Then she took off her beautiful earrings and necklace that she had been wearing all day, and put them back in the box they came in. She put the box into a small metal chest where she kept all her treasures. It was a funny, old rusty box, really, but it was large enough to hold many of the pretty little keepsakes Jo had collected over the years. “I want to keep these for special occasions.”

The three girls went back into the kitchen to discuss the party with Jo’s mom. More than the other two girls’ moms, they all three knew that Linda Becker loved to hear every detail about any event they had attended, so they laughed and grinned and told story after story of the evening. Soon, she was placing hot bowls of soup in front of each of them, and one for herself. Charlie was relaying the water fight with Danny and Rob, and paused as Jo’s mom sat down and said a sweet, short prayer, blessing the food. As soon as she heard the “Amen,” Charlie picked up the story.

This kind of day was a favorite for Jo and her mom. Jo loved it that her friends loved her mom, and that her mom loved her friends. It was a perfect ending to a great day.

About nine o’clock, Charlie looked at Alex and suggested she should get home, since she had to leave early for the airport. Alex glanced at her clock, startled. She joked that time flew at the Becker house, and Jo’s mom smiled. Yes, it was a great day.

Jo walked Alex and Charlie out to Alex’s car.

“See you in three weeks, Charlie,” Jo hugged her tight. “Be safe in the big city. Don’t go anywhere alone.”

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