

An Afternoon in the Dark

"Could you turn it up a little?" Liz asked, pointing toward the radio.

The noise coming out of the speakers was a little louder and Liz listened. Caleb had burned her another mix CD and the two were listening to it in Caleb's car on the way to his house.

"What? You having trouble hearing? Don't the other senses get stronger or something? I thought that was the rule."

"I didn't get super-hearing with this," Liz gestured at her face, her fingernail brushing against the sunglasses. "Besides, I couldn't hear over your mouth breathing..."

"Jerk..."

"Loser," Liz laughed. She felt the car turn hard to the right, making the sharp turn down Caleb's road. Despite living his whole life in one house, Liz felt that he still always managed to almost miss the turn. At one point, she was pretty sure he had done it just to shake her up and startle her.

The car came to a shuttering halt. "Your check engine light is on again, isn't it?"

"If I say yes, would you still let me give you a ride home?"

"I trust you," Liz said, fumbling with her book bag. She opened the door and stepped out of the car. With a flick of her wrist, Liz heard her cane snap open. She shuffled the ground around her with the rod, ensuring Caleb's gravel driveway wasn't closer or further away than she expected it would be. When she felt satisfied the immediate ground wouldn't kill her, she stepped out of the car and moved towards the crunching sound beneath Caleb's footsteps.

There was a cool breeze running through the trees overhead, rustling the leaves and blowing Liz's long hair in her face. It was still early in the school year and Liz hadn't needed a jacket. A few birds were chirping nearby and Caleb's car engine popped and creaked as it cooled down. The air smelled like someone had lit a fire somewhere, no doubt Caleb's neighbor trying to take advantage of the last few warm days to cook on his grill.

"Any new trees to watch out for?" Liz asked, feeling her way towards the front

steps.

"My dad hasn't planted anything since that time you tripped over the bushes. He didn't want you face planting into his garden and putting your eye out."

"What's the difference?" Liz smirked, finding the concrete steps with the tip of her cane. Caleb offered to help her, but she continued up the stairs at her pace.

Caleb opened the door with his house key and called into the home, to no response. Smells of fresh ground cinnamon and cooked, brown sugar filled the air and Liz knew that Caleb's mother had cooked some of her famous cinnamon cookies.

Liz counted to herself. "Three, two. One..."

The heavyset boxer came lumbering down the stairs. Caleb's dog, Hercules, had a very distinct smell and never barked. Hercules still was always happy to see Liz and the sound of his nails clicking against the tile floor brought a smile to Liz's face. She reached out and the dog's wet nose touched her fingers. Liz knelt and set her cane aside, giving her both hands to rub the canine's neck.

"There's my big boy," Liz smiled, accepting the dog's rough tongue against her cheek. Hercules was wagging his little stub of a tail so fast that Liz could feel it in his shoulders. The sound of the dog smelling her hair prepared her for the quick puffs of air when he sniffed at her ears.

"Come on, Herk," Caleb whistled, calling the dog outside. Liz brushed her hair back when Hercules rushed for the door and felt on the tile for her cane.

"You alright?"

"I got it," Liz said, feeling around on the cold, smooth plaster. "He must have kicked it in the excitement...there it is."

Liz struggled with balancing her backpack as she stood, but managed to get to her feet before Caleb had the opportunity to offer to help again. After giving Caleb a minute to grab two of the cookies, Liz led the way to his room. Her hand touched the smooth sheetrock, the minor imperfections like warning lights against her fingertips. The walls eventually turned into a railing with five banisters before Liz could turn onto the main stairs. The pair made their way up the stairs, Liz's counting just below the sound of a

whispered breath. When she counted eight stairs, she made the turn on the small landing and climbed up the last eight.

"It never fails to amaze me," Caleb said. "I still trip on these stairs in the dark."

"It's always dark for me," Liz retorted. Another turn and she knew she was in Caleb's room.

"This part's a little hazardous," Liz confessed, pushing things aside with her cane. She made it to the bed and felt for the mattress. Once she sat down, Liz folded her cane and put it into her bag. She heard Caleb messing with the CD player and the music picked up where they'd left off in the car.

"Can I listen to your bio notes? I kinda dozed off."

"You know they're catching on," Liz pulled the recorder from her bag and felt the side of each tape deck for the subject. "I don't mind letting you listen to my notes, but at least try to keep your own?"

"I do," Caleb said, insulted. "I just can't listen to Mr. Dawson's voice first thing in the morning. Last time, I promise."

"OK," Liz said. "But you need to help me with math. Geometry is too visual for me..."

"Anything for you," Caleb said. "Someone's gotta watch your back."

"I'd offer to watch yours, but then I'd be next to useless..."