

## Super Man

It's a brick house.

First question answered.

I sit in my car, a 2003 Grand Am that I had to buy with money I earned working at the public library for the last couple of years, and stare at the house. It's a light colored brick, like some kind of pastel color with powdered sugar sprayed on it.

I started this drive about five hours ago, give or take. But I guess I started this whole journey thing about twelve years ago, not long after I turned five. Two weeks after I turned five, actually, when my friend Alicia turned five and *her dad* was at her party. Her *mom and dad* were at the swim party, both of them with swimsuits and wedding rings on.

I went home that day and for the first time, I asked my mom why I didn't have a daddy to come to my birthday parties.

Maybe that was the first time Mom lied to me. She said I had a daddy, but he was a really busy, important man and maybe one day I would meet him. Okay, Mom's not a bad person; let me just get that out there. I guess she just didn't know how to deal with the whole 'where's my daddy' question.

Mom and I live in Metropolis, Illinois, so maybe it was natural for me to think my dad was Superman. After all, Superman is *from* Metropolis and he is pretty busy and important.

I quit thinking that when I was, like, seven. I mean, once you figure out that there are *no* men who fly and wear blue tights and red capes and save people from danger, you pretty much can't hold onto the fantasy that *your dad* is one of those guys.

But the questions about my dad never went away. In fact, they just kept coming and then kind of piling up in my brain, and finally, I started writing them down. I wondered about who he was and why he didn't want me. I wondered where he was, what he did, and if he ever wondered

about me. If he liked dogs or cats and if he was a football fan.

I will admit that when all of the superhero movies started coming out again, even though I was, like, way old enough to know better, I wondered again if maybe it was possible my dad was Superman. Maybe there was some law in the universe where Superman is from that said he couldn't meet his children until they turned sixteen. But when my sixteenth birthday came and went and no caped guy in blue tights and no tall guy in a suit and black rimmed glasses came to my house and introduced himself to me as my dad, I put that crazy dream away again.

I did get something for my sixteenth birthday though. Mom got me a couple of books I wanted and a new sweater and a CD, but she also told me his name.

Michael Vaughn.

So, armed with a name and a renewed excitement, I started planning. When I graduated from high school, I would find him and go to him. Tell him who I was. In those plans, he was always happy to see me. He didn't *know* about me, and okay, in those plans/dreams/schemes (whatever) I always kind of blamed my mom for that. Allowed myself a few minutes to be mad at her.

So. First part of the plan done. Graduated. (A year early, so technically I am not eighteen and won't be for another year, but I do have a driver's license, and I don't think it's illegal for a seventeen year to drive five hours across a state to meet her dad.)

Once Mom gave me his name, it was pretty easy to find him, really. There were fifty-three Michael Vaughn's when I did that people search online. But then I narrowed it down to Illinois, hoping that my father hadn't moved clear across the country to live on the beach in California.

(Although when I was much younger, I imagined that he might be a fun-loving beach bum kind of guy, who would one day teach me to surf or snorkel or both.) Seven Michael Vaughns in Illinois. Two of them, I found out after more searching, were dead. One was an old man who had died of natural causes, and the other was a young kid-like my age-who had been killed in a car accident. That left five. Two of those five were ancient, like, in their 60s or 70s and I couldn't imagine my mom being with a guy that much older than she is. At least I sure hoped not. One of the remaining Michael Vaughns was twenty-six and the other one was thirty-five. That would just about work out with that whole who would my mom have dated (you know what I mean) that could be my father.

So, it's a brick house. It might not be the first question on my list, exactly. (The FIRST question, the absolute most important question is WHY? Why didn't you ever come for me?) But it is a question I've always had. Where did he live? What state? City? In a subdivision or in the country? House or apartment? Attached garage or carport?

I wonder if he's in there right now. The windows are like giant eyes, like the house is looking at me, wondering what I'm doing parked in the street, staring at it. So maybe I'm crazy, but I have the thought that it's not fair that the house can stare at me, because I can't see inside it. It's like the house *knows* who I am and what I'm doing and it's closing ranks against me to keep me away from him.

Enough of this, I decide, and I take a deep breath. I've never been particularly brave, but I'm not a chicken either. It'd be pretty dumb if I could make the drive by myself and then not be brave enough to go up to the door and knock. *Ask for him.*

The whole neighborhood is quiet, and when I close my car door, it's so loud, it sounds like I slammed it in anger. There's no one around, and as I take those first few steps toward the driveway, I decide that might be a good thing. If this turns out badly, then I won't have an

audience when I hightail it back to the car and get out of here.

But still, the quiet freaks me out. It makes me feel like it's the whole neighborhood watching me, waiting to see me make a fool of myself. Like just as I drove into the subdivision, all the houses took a deep breath and now they're all holding it, and it's so quiet they can probably all hear my heartbeat.

The yard is perfect, and as I walk up the driveway, I have visions of him, of *my father*, out here walking behind a lawn mower, maybe with an iPod, so he can listen to his favorite music. I wonder what kind of music he likes. Maybe he is why I like hard rock and heavy metal, when all my mom listened to when I was growing up was jazz and easy listening.

The front door is huge and ornate, and I'm a little bit awed and kind of put off. He obviously lives well, and I don't begrudge him that. But I guess I just wish he would have spent some of his time and his money looking for me.

I reach out to ring the doorbell and a million thoughts hit me all at once. It's after three o'clock. What if he has kids? What if this door opens and I find myself face to face with some perfect little blue-eyed

blonde girl? Or maybe worse, what if a boy answers the door? A boy who can play football or baseball and make him proud, when I can't?

What if he's out of town? What if he's still at work? Where do I go to wait? What if his wife doesn't like me? What if *he* doesn't like me?

I hear the bell inside the house. It's not particularly hot out, but I feel sweat roll down my back. No one's coming. I don't hear anything. No TV. No little kids yelling, no big kids yelling, no dog, no footsteps. Nothing.

With a deep breath, I glance behind me. Maybe to make sure he and his family aren't just turning the corner and pulling up into the driveway and wondering who the stranger is that's ringing the doorbell. But there's no one there.

My hand shakes this time when I ring the bell. Suddenly this feels like a bad idea. Whoever *he* is, *he* never felt the need to find me. So he doesn't need me. He has a life. A pretty wonderful life in this huge house that looks like a mansion compared to the house I grew up in.

I don't need him. I've made it seventeen years without him, and okay, so I never had a dad to play catch with me. And I didn't have a Dad to come to school on

career day and talk about what he does for a living (those were the days when I still wondered if he was Superman) and I didn't have a Dad to help me work through the increasingly hard math classes I took.

And I made it okay.

Still no sound. No kids or dogs or footsteps hurrying to the door. There's no one here. *Turn around and go, Karlin. Just go.* I do. I turn around and see my car parked in the street. It doesn't belong here. It doesn't fit in. I should be driving some kind of SUV or something to fit in here. Like a black Hyundai or something. Sleek and new and shiny.

Who was I to think I could just walk into his life and find a place? *Why would he want anything to do with me?* I glance at my shoes as I step off the porch. I'd worn my brown suede boots, with my skinny leg jeans tucked in. My nicest boots, nicest jeans. Maybe nothing I had could fit in here anyway.

"Can I help you?"

I stop walking when I hear the voice. I should just go. Just tell the woman I made a mistake, that I'm at the wrong house. *Boy, are you, Karlin.*

But I hate that little voice inside me that's always trying to make me feel bad about myself. She talks to me a lot when I think about my father, and I get so tired of it.

I take a deep breath, rub my sweaty hands over my jeans and turn to look at the woman who answered the door. She looks young, sort of, but not young enough to be a daughter. That's a relief. But I'm still scared.

She's got dark blonde hair, but the porch is kind of shadowed so I can't see her that well. She wears jeans too and a heavy cable-knit sweater. It's not cold, and looking at her in that sweater makes me hot and itchy.

Or maybe that's just my nerves?

"Look, I'm not interested--"

I take a step toward her and shake my head. She's trying to dismiss me as a neighbor kid selling something. I'm not going to let that happen. I've come this far, and I'm scared to death, but now that she's answered the door, I'm not going to leave without meeting him.

"I'm looking for Michael Vaughn." My voice is quiet, but I see that she hears the strength in it by the way she stands up straighter and eyes me wearily.

"I'm sorry," she says coldly. She sounds anything but sorry. "He's not here."

She's already edging back inside so she can shut the door in my face. I hurry two steps closer and almost hop up onto the porch. Closer like this, she looks older. Her makeup doesn't cover the bags under her eyes. She's attractive, and I'm betting that a smile would make her even prettier, but she looks tired. Frazzled, the way my mom looks after working Black Friday.

"Could you tell me when he'll be back?" I ask quickly. I half reach out to stop her from shutting the door, but I lose my nerve and let my arm drop to my side. "I'd just...I'd just like to talk to him for a minute."

The woman squeezes her eyes shut and kind of grimaces. I feel a funny kind of pinch in my chest, like where my heart is, and I can't swallow. What if they're divorced? Why hadn't I thought of that sooner? What if he just left her and here I am dragging her through it all again?

"Who are you?" she asks me. At least she hasn't closed the door yet. I watch as she rubs her eyes with her fingertips.

Do I tell her? I don't know what to do. What if I tell her and she goes jealous wife on me and yells at me to leave and then he never even knows I was here?

"Karlin. Karlin Cassidy."

Of course. If you're thinking hey maybe Shaun Cassidy is her father, well, yes, of course I wondered that too for awhile when I was a kid. But then I wondered how in the world my mom would ever meet Shaun Cassidy and then I figured he'd probably be way older than her and I didn't want to think about that anymore.

The woman turns her head. Like I hit her, and she's offering me the other cheek, like the bible says. I watch her press her lips together, like she's scared she's going to start talking and say something she doesn't want to.

"You're Mariah's daughter."

Okay, first? My mom's name is Mariah Jane Cassidy. But since I was like five, she's gone by Mary. So it kind of makes me feel weird to hear her called Mariah again. And then really? This woman *knows* my mother? Then doesn't that mean my father knows about me?

"You know my mother?"

My stomach hurts. Maybe because my heart is beating so hard right now, it's like a horse galloping away in there. All over the rest of me. My throat is all tight and squeezed off, and I can't swallow or really talk, when there're like a million words inside that I'd like to say. To shout. She knows my mother? Why didn't Mom ever say anything to me? She even *knew* when I left this morning

where I was going and what I was doing. Why wouldn't she have *told* me?

"No."

No? My turn to turn away like she'd slapped me. She doesn't know my mother? She does? It crosses my mind then how much easier life might be if adults could just say what they mean.

I take a deep breath. The woman is leaning against the doorframe, and I wonder if she's okay. Maybe she's sick. She looks pale, and like maybe if that doorframe moved, she might fall. I kind of feel bad for her, but I kind of don't either. Because she's not being very helpful, and this isn't easy and really, all I want right now is to go home and crawl into my bed and cry.

This man who is supposed to be my father doesn't want me. If the way this woman is standing guard against me even *seeing* into her house means anything, she doesn't want me around either. Maybe their kids ride the bus or something, and they'll be home any minute and she doesn't want them to see me.

Might be hard to tell them Superman has another child that he doesn't even know.

Then again, he's not Superman to them. He's just Dad.

"Look. I just want to talk to Michael Vaughn. Can you tell me when I can talk to him?"

"I'm sorry," she says again, but this time she sounds like she means it. In fact, I think she's crying. "Mike was...Mike was killed in a car accident a couple of months ago."

It's like her lips are moving, and I hear her voice, but I don't get what she's saying. A car flies down the street, and I turn to watch it race up toward the main entrance to the subdivision. When I look back, she's gone and the front door is closed.

I feel like the sidewalk is tilting up at me. I passed out once in school, when I was a freshman. I guess I hadn't eaten enough, and I wasn't sleeping, because I was staying up late to study. I remember feeling really weak and hot during my honors English class, and then it was like my desk was moving up at me.

So maybe I should get back to my car. Because I think if I pass out here on this woman's sidewalk, she might have the police come and remove me. I turn back toward the street. My car's still there, and suddenly, all I want to do is get in that car and drive. Not even home. I just want to go. Anywhere but here.

I feel like an idiot. Had I really believed this had a potential happily-ever-after ending? Because really, no matter how I look at it right this minute, there's no good way for today to have gone. If he has children, it's really selfish of me to barge in on their lives like this. Hey, kids, I'm your older half-sister. If he's divorced, it's pretty hurtful for his wife to have to deal with me. If he's-

Killed. She'd said that. Hadn't she? Killed in a car accident?

I want to go to my car and get the hell out of here. But I can't. I can't make my feet move. It's like I'm wearing that ball and chain thing that you see prisoners wear in cartoons.

Seventeen years. I've waited seventeen years to meet my father, and now here I am and he's gone.

My eyes burn, and my car blurs in my vision. I hate to cry. I really do. I only cry when I'm alone. At home. With the teddy bear my mom gave me when I was a baby.

Finally I pick up one foot and take a step. And another. And another. Until suddenly I am standing at my car. It's just that I don't remember each step I've taken to get here and now that I stand at the door, I can't make

myself think. I can't make myself move and get my keys from my pocket so I can unlock the door and go home.

I can't imagine the drive home. Another five hours on the road. The first five weren't so bad. I played my CDs and thought of all the things my father and I might say to each other and learn about each other. I was pumped up like a kid on Red Bull. But driving home now? This is going to be hard. I'm not sure I can concentrate hard enough to get home.

I can stay in a hotel. Nothing fancy, but I did bring cash to stay, just in case things went so well, my father might ask me to stay another day to spend more time together. I never imagined when I packed the cash that I might find something like this at the end of my rainbow.

"Hey, Kiddo."

I don't look up when that woman suddenly approaches me from behind. I didn't hear her open the door and come back outside.

"What?" I sound steady. My voice is steady. I'm not crying. Well. I wonder how you would cry about the death of someone you've never met. It's the end of my dream, I guess, but then I've had this dream stepped on for years and maybe somewhere deep inside I knew it was never going to work out.

"Do you know someone here?" she asks me. Standing side by side now, I see that she is at least half a foot taller than me. Her blonde hair is a little bit long for her face, but I am guessing she normally keeps it shorter. Her green, bloodshot eyes are lined in a soft brown, and her lips are chapped.

Know someone here? I shake my head at her. Why is she asking me that? Why is she here? In the street talking to me?

"Do you have a place to stay tonight? Where do you live?"

"I'm fine," I answer without really answering what she asked me. Suddenly what I do or where I am from is not really any of her business, and I don't plan to share anything with her.

"Mike told me that Mariah is from Metropolis. Do you still live there?"

"In that area." I nod.

"You can't drive home tonight."

"I'm fine." I have no idea what she might be suggesting, but a wave of anger kind of climbs inside me and I want to lash out at her. It's not her fault that he's dead, I know, and yet, since she told me, I am angry mostly at her. Maybe a little bit at God, which is funny,

because I've spent the past several years alternately begging God to let me find my father and pretending that I didn't believe in him.

"I'm not gonna let you turn around and drive back home like that. You're too tired--"

"You don't know anything about me, m'am," I say quietly. Once again, my heart pounds inside, but this is fury. This woman, this stranger, has no right to tell me what I can and can not do.

She raises her eyebrows, like she's agreeing with me. But she seems fidgety and unsure of herself. She clears her throat and then slips her hands inside her jeans pockets.

"You're right, I don't," she mumbles. She won't meet my eye, and I get the feeling she doesn't know how to talk to me. Maybe she's never been around teenagers before. Maybe her children are still young.

"I just wanted to..." I swallow hard and shrug and then look away. A minute ago, before she came outside again, I was afraid I might cry all the way home. Now the tears are gone, and they've taken everything. I'm kind of numb inside, and I don't care what this woman thinks or wants. "Just wanted to meet him. Once."

"He would've liked you," she offers, still not looking at me, still with her hands in her pockets.

"What's to like? You don't know me. He wouldn't know me any better."

She hesitates and then lifts her gaze to meet mine for a moment. "He'd have liked that you came all this way by yourself to find answers. And he would've liked your eyes."

What is that supposed to mean? The man who fathered me would have liked my eyes? Is that supposed to make me feel better that he's dead? That she just dumped that on me and then shut the door in my face?

"Great," I hear my voice, but I hardly recognize it. I am not generally rude, but then I'm not often in this sort of situation. "It was...nice...meeting you."

I don't lie often, either, but I'm not sure what to say here. Not like I have a handbook on how to talk to the woman who was married to the father I never met.

"Why don't you at least come in for coffee?" This time she reaches out to me. I look down at her hand on my arm and fight the need to peel her fingers off me one by one.

"I don't drink coffee," I tell her. My two best friends, Ashley and Nathan, drink coffee all the time, and they roll their eyes at me because I drink Mountain Dew.

It's like a big joke now with the three of us, like they have more class than me because they drink espressos and lattes and stuff out of fancy stoneware mugs, and I like my Mountain Dew's from the fountain, over lots of crushed ice.

"Oh yeah. What are you? Like nineteen or something?"

Not sure what that has to do with it, since *most* kids I know need (i.e. want) coffee to get through a school day, I just kind of give her a nod.

"Or something," I say.

"Then come in and drink a soda. I was just sitting on the deck...earlier."

So she's sitting on the deck in the middle of the day and what? Her kids ride the school bus?

"No, thank you."

"Please?" she says so quietly, I wonder if I imagined it. "I'm sorry. For the way I dumped that on you." She kind of nods toward the house, and I figure she means she's sorry for how she told me that my father is dead. "At least take a break before you get back on the road."

I almost say something mean. I almost say 'why? Because I could get in a wreck and you could have that guilt on your shoulders?' But I don't. Not because I really care if she would feel guilty, (I don't think she would) but because maybe it makes her think of him. A car

accident would make her think of him, and I guess maybe that would be bad, to be the one to remind her of how her husband died.

I shrug and turn away from my car. "Sure, okay."

She leads me back up the sidewalk to the front door. From behind her, I watch her walk. She still has her hands in her pockets. Her feet are bare; her toenails are painted a deep, dark red. Her pant legs are raveled from dragging on the ground when she walks, and it reminds me of Ashley. She's like a foot shorter than me, and all of her pants are way long. She won't let her mom hem them. This woman's jeans have designer pockets, and again, I think of Ashley. Or kids, teens, in general. My mom wears jeans, but she just looks different in them than this woman.

"I'm Elaine," she tells me as we step inside the house. It's not overdone, and I'm pleasantly surprised. The house is finished in warm earth tones, and there is a chocolate brown leather sofa taking up a huge space in the living room. A big screen TV hangs on the wall. I wonder if my father sat there on Sundays and watched football.

I tear my eyes away from the TV and look back at her.

"Look, I'm sorry I barged in on you like this," I say sincerely. "I guess I didn't think about anyone but myself."

Elaine raises her eyebrows and grabs a Coke from the refrigerator. She hands it to me and then slides her hands back into her pockets.

"It's okay," she mumbles. I wonder if she is this shy with everyone-she won't look me in the eye-or if it's just me. "Guess it's natural for you to be curious."

"Yeah." I pop the Coke open when it becomes obvious that it's the full offer. No glass of ice. No invitation to sit down. "I guess I didn't really notice until I was about five. Then I started seeing other kids with moms and dads."

Elaine nods. "My dad used to take me fishing. Until I turned twelve and girly."

Good thing she's not looking at me, because it hurts and I probably have some horrible look on my face. Nice of her to share her memories of her dad with me.

Okay, so I have a Coke. I'm armed with some caffeine, and I have money. And this woman is acting like I am Medusa, like I will turn her to stone if she meets my eye. I'm out of here.

"Look, um..." I hate to just leave though. This is his house. He *lived* here. As much as I want to get away from her, as uncomfortable as I feel, I just want to stand here a minute longer and *be* in his house. "Thanks for the Coke.

I'm just gonna go. I should be out of the way when your kids get home from school."

"We don't have children," she answers and her eyes meet mine for a second. She shrugs kind of apologetically. "Mike wanted to, but...I didn't."

Wow. So I am his only child, and maybe, if we'd have met, we could have hit it off. Maybe he could have taken me fishing. Or taught me to drive. Or convinced me that Tom Brady is hall of fame material (okay, he could have tried, but no one can convince me of that.)

So that's why she won't look me in the eye. She doesn't like kids. How inconvenient for her to be stuck with me standing in her kitchen.

I nod. Suddenly I don't even want the Coke. "Thank you for your time."

"Karlin," she calls as I reach the front door. I hesitate, but I don't look back. "Do you-I can get you a picture of him."

I stare at my boots. A picture. Well, okay, I desperately want a picture of him, but what good is that going to do me now? It'll probably only make me feel worse. I think I'd rather hear stories about him; I'd rather *get to know* him than *see* him.

I glance over my shoulder at Elaine. She's standing about two feet behind me, with her arms crossed over her chest. She looks lost, and again, I remember that I am intruding. Maybe not on a happy family life, but I am intruding, just the same.

"Thanks, but that's okay." I smile, but my eyes are starting to burn again. I don't want to cry in front of her.

"He didn't know..." she says softly as I pull the door open. "He didn't know she was pregnant."

I don't move. Not even to look at her.

"He told me about her. Said he'd loved her, but they'd gone their separate ways. If he'd known, he would've stepped up."

Stepped up=been responsible. That doesn't really make me feel any better.

"He ran five miles every morning. He liked his coffee black, and he loved cheeseburgers. Whenever we went out to eat, he ordered cheeseburgers."

I'm not a runner. I can, like in PE class, when I have to. But I'm not one of those people who enjoys getting up at 5 am just to stretch her legs and find that exercise rush. And I like cheeseburgers, but I'm not crazy about them.

I edge closer to the door.

"He loved baseball and football, and he watched basketball, but he didn't like the NBA. He preferred college basketball."

Probably a Duke fan.

"Hated Duke." She sighs, and when I look at her, her eyes are closed and she looks as if she's concentrating. Pulling a mental picture of Michael Vaughn together for his illegitimate daughter. "He was an Illini fan, of course. Die-hard Cubs fan, and he was always saying 'there's always next year.'"

A Cubs fan? Really?

"Bears fan, but he liked the Rams too. And anyone who played the Patriots--"

I laugh. Okay, so maybe he wouldn't have tried to sell me on Tom Brady being a hall of famer.

"He went to church every Sunday, and he ushered and he read--"

"You don't go?" I don't know why I ask, but I want to know. I want to know if Elaine went with him every Sunday, if she sat beside him in the pew and if they prayed together.

"Sometimes," she answers quietly.

"What did he wear?" I ask and I know how crazy I sound. But I want to know. Add it to the list of questions in my mind: What did my father wear to mass on Sundays?

"What do you mean?" she asks me.

"To church. What did he wear to church?"

She shrugs, but she's quiet for a moment. "Depended on the day. Sometimes he wore jeans. When he ushered or read, he wore trousers and shirts and ties."

"He got the chicken pox when he was nine." It's not like she's reciting a paper she read, but she lists the memories almost as if she needs to prove something to me. I'm not sure what it would be. That he was a good guy? *That she loved him, and so I don't need to worry about never being a part of his life?* He never missed me like I missed him. How could he have missed me, when he didn't know I was alive?

But really, did I miss him? Did I miss Michael Vaughn, the man? Or did I just miss having a father in my life?

Maybe talking to Elaine would give me the opportunity to miss Michael Vaughn, the man. I don't love the idea of talking to her, especially since she is obviously uncomfortable with me here. But I think getting to know

him as a real man would be better than missing a generic father.

"I got 'em twice," I tell her, before remembering that she probably doesn't care.

But she smiles. She glances at the front door, still standing wide open, but she doesn't mention it.

"Broke his wrist in a skateboarding accident when he was eleven. Got MVP of his baseball league when he was twelve."

"I played on a boys' baseball team until I was nine."

This time, she smiles really big, and I see that she is a very pretty woman. The smile lights up her eyes.

"He would've loved that."

"I was a catcher," I continue, because that little bit of encouragement, just *knowing* that he would've liked that about me, makes me feel good. "My mom used to pitch to me. Then when I was nine, they wouldn't let me play anymore. Because I'm a girl."

"Well, that sucks," she says so sincerely that for the first time I kind of like her a little. We both laugh then, and she moves past me to shut the door. "Bring your Coke."

I grab the Coke and follow her out to the deck. It's kind of weird. Their house is butted up against the yard

of another house. There's no wooded border or anything. There's a grill in one corner of the deck and a fire pit in another. I picture the two of them sitting by the fire pit, drinking hot chocolate or something. Probably or something, but hot chocolate sounds right to me.

"We talked about planting some evergreens," she says and she nods to the back of the deck. "Would've been nice to have a little privacy."

I wonder then how many things they'd planned to do that they would never get a chance to do now.

"He was...he was in computer software sales. And he was driving home from the airport...He'd been in Boston. A conference there...He was on his way home." She clears her throat. So, yeah, okay, this is a question that should definitely be on my list: How'd he die? But I'm not ready to hear this part. I want to hear more about who he was.

"Drunk driver hit him."

For a moment, I wonder if his death has any connection to the alcohol and drug free pledge I made when I was sixteen. But then I remember that he just died, so it's not like there was some sort of cosmic connection between us, influencing my decision.

Did he die instantly? I hope he did. I hope he didn't lay on the highway, with cars speeding by, only

slowing to stare at the accident. I hope he didn't lay there alone with time to think about dying.

"They told me he didn't feel a thing." She stands in the corner of the deck now, looking at the backyard. "I hope they're right."

"I pledged to an alcohol and drug free life. At school last year."

I'm not sure why I say it, but the words are out before I can stop them.

Elaine looks at me over her shoulder. "Thank you." She gives me a small nod. "The driver was a nineteen year old kid. Killed him and his passenger too."

I lick my lips nervously. "Is that why you didn't want kids? Because so many of us are screw-ups?"

She turns around and studies my face in silence. "I didn't want kids because I'm scared of you. Scared for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't get kids. I've never been around many kids, and I don't know how to...I don't get you. A lot of you are screwed up. I don't know if I'd say--"

"I'm not," I say boldly. "I know a lot are. But I'm not. I graduated with an A average. I'm going to college. I wanna be a teacher."

She winces. So maybe telling her I want to be a teacher isn't the best choice. If she doesn't like kids, teaching as a career won't impress her. And suddenly I realize that's what I want. I want to impress her, because I can't impress him. My chance for that is gone.

"That's good, Karlin," she finally says. "That's great. Mike would've been proud of you."

It's something. It's not what I wanted, to be told by his widow that he'd have been proud of me. But it's something, at least.

"Let me...let me show you his picture..."

I nod, because even though I want to know more about him, even though I could listen to her talk for days, I would like something to take with me when I go. If I can't ever know if he would have loved me, I need something else to take when I leave. Maybe she'll let me have a picture of him.

I wait on the deck when she goes back inside. There's a gentle breeze, and if I were a spiritual person, I might think my father is in that breeze, holding me the only way he can.

But I'm not, really. I'm practical, and I know he's gone. The closest I will ever get to knowing him is through Elaine.

Her nails are bare, and I see her hands are dry when she hands me the picture. She's like a woman falling apart, forgetting who she is after losing her husband.

She's given me a snapshot of a blonde guy. He's standing on this deck, by the grill. There's a small bald spot on the top of his head, but he looks lean and fit. Probably from all the running. He has blue eyes.

Like me.

He's smiling so big, I can feel the warmth radiating out of the picture. I wonder how he and Elaine met. Why he and my mother parted. If he and I would have been friends.

I wonder if he would have loved me, if he'd have known about me from the beginning.

"He wanted kids," Elaine tells me. She presses her lips together, because she's crying again. "We argued about it sometimes. He loved being with our friends' kids. His nieces and nephews."

It's almost like she can read my mind.

"He would've loved you, Karlin."

"How do you know?" My breath catches in my throat. I should go home now, because I'm going to cry.

"I knew Mike."

The way she says it makes me feel good. Not like she's saying she knew Mike and I didn't. But like she knew Mike and she knew what he loved and didn't love, and so if she says he would've loved me, then maybe he would've.

"I um..." she frowns and takes a deep breath, "I have photo albums. Even some video."

Video. How many more questions could I answer from my list, if I saw a video of him? I could hear his voice. See how he walked, listen to his laugh.

She's watching me, waiting for an answer. It's different, looking at her and knowing she's afraid of me, of kids. Maybe not so much that she doesn't *like* me, but more that she doesn't know what *to do with me*.

I wonder if by staying I can give her something of Mike back. Am I anything like him?

"When I was little, I wondered if my father was Super Man."

She smiles kind of wistfully then, but there're still tears in her eyes. "He kind of was. At least I thought so."

And so we go inside and she tells me to sit down on the couch. I watch her hunt through a cabinet of little DVDs, like home movies.

So maybe my father is a Super Man. And now I'm going to watch him on TV.