

Kaleidoscope

ME

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Fiction

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*To my son. May you always be you,
even if it causes a little bit of trouble.*

Chapter 1

5:30 P.M.

“Dad, she’s lost it again.” I nervously wrapped a section of red hair around my finger, a letter clutched in my other hand, the phone wedged between my shoulder and my ear.

I heard him pull the phone away and yell something to the noise in the background. I stopped pacing just long enough to take another glance out the window, fingers twirling my hair even faster. The rush of white outside made me sympathize with the plastic snowman inside my favorite snow globe that my brother threw down the stairs when he was two. The horizontal lines of snow turned my stomach in knots, like the globe would split open

soon and all the glittery white would just come to a stop. Or at least that's how I imagined the snowman felt as it bumped down the stairs before cracking open at the bottom.

The phone crackled a little, and I imagined Dad putting the phone back to his ear. "Okay, now what did you say?"

"Great-Aunt Nadine. She's lost it again." I waited a second and he still wasn't saying anything so I kept going. "Only I think it's serious this time. She left me a letter in my bedroom, only it's addressed to Adrienne..." I paused a little, slowly pronouncing Mom's name. "...and dated 1983. I looked everywhere in the house and walked around the block twice and I can't find her." The words rushed out even faster than the falling snow.

He sighed. "She's probably fine. She knows how to take care of herself; she's there to take care of you."

I chewed on my bottom lip, remembering Aunt Nadine's advice about counting to three before saying anything in an argument. At two, I remembered how badly some of her other advice had turned out and my tongue just started functioning on its own. "Dad, she's eighty years old and one minute knows what day it is and the next she thinks we're still at war with Germany."

"I don't have time for your sarcasm," he said, before yelling something else to the muffled clatter in the background. "She probably just had to run to the grocery store and forgot to tell you."

“But...”

“I’ll be home in an hour. If she’s not back by then, I’ll start to worry. I’ll see you when I get home.”

I heard the phone click and I sat down in the window seat, watching snowflakes twist, twirl and dance, remembering when Mom and I would catch them on our tongues, standing there with my head craned backwards for so long that my neck hurt and my tongue was on the verge of freezing and still only the promise of hot chocolate could get me inside. I cleared my throat, hoping it would take away some of the hollowness inside just a little bit, or at least the private burn of future tears from my eyes. *Think of something else*, I told myself, which usually isn’t hard to do, since my mind wanders 99 percent of the time. The problem was that the wandering usually led back to Mom or her photos or her cooking or her just being gone. *Think about...the snow.*

Peering in the back yard, I had to squint to distinguish the white yard from the flurries in the air, but I noticed footprints going out from the back door. I noticed the snow was quickly covering up two sets of prints, a mid-sized print, and a small one. My heart seemed to stop. Trenton. I thought he had been in his room.

“Trenton!” I shouted, sticking my head in every room upstairs before skidding down the steps, my feet frantically carrying me

through the living room, dining room and kitchen then straight out the back door, the letter still clutched in my hand. Snow seeped into my socks. The yard was empty.

“Trenton!” I shouted again, although I knew it was useless. Both Aunt Nadine and Trenton were gone, I realized, and the cold winter air seemed to settle deep inside me.

I looked back at the letter in my hand. Mom’s name was clearly on top, right next to May 3, 1983. She didn’t even get the month right. It didn’t snow in May. This kind of wet, almost-spring snow could only be for February. At least in Michigan anyways. But it seemed as if she wrote the letter for me. *You and I, we think differently than everyone else does. But that’s okay, I’d like to think that’s the stuff of geniuses*, her handwriting said.

Sometimes, my mind is a kaleidoscope. Somewhere, buried beneath a hundred different swirling colors, is the original image, but as the dial turns, the original meshes with colors and becomes something completely different. Like the letter in my hand. It reminds me of how my hand shook as I tried to read my own handwriting in front of a hundred people at Mom’s funeral, which swirls into the time Mom told me to date my thoughts like a book (so I could choose only the ‘book’ I needed whenever it was hard to focus), which becomes the conversation I overheard when Dad decided Aunt Nadine would help look after me and my brother.

And then the dial turns to the first time Aunt Nadine lost it.

TWO MONTHS AGO

The woman wandering in the median looked like she belonged in a photo from the 1800s, one of those prairie women, especially when her long, floral print dress caught the wind of a passing semi. My breath made the windows fog and I pressed my finger to the bus window and began to trace the shape of a mountain. As we drove closer, I could see that the woman was old. Then I could see she wasn't wearing any shoes.

Her bare feet crushed down long grass, brown grass, the kind just waiting for the first snowfall, as she wandered to the edge of one lane of traffic, then turned and wandered towards the other.

I wondered where her shoes were.

My eyes turned back out the bus window. And then I could see that the crazy lady in the median was the same old woman who had tried to offer me scrambled eggs this morning.

I stared at her through the line my finger had made on the window, then cautiously looked around the bus to see whether anyone else noticed the strange prairie woman. They hadn't, or at least no one seemed to.

I added a sun to the mountain as I watched the woman walk to one lane of traffic, then stumble backwards, turn around and walk

to the other. I tried to picture what would happen if I asked the driver to stop and let me out there. He'd probably flick his pepper gray mustache and narrow his eyes. And say no. Or maybe a few people on the bus would notice that I turned back to walk towards the crazy old woman.

I craned my neck to look back at her. She was weaving in between the lanes again, only now she looked more like she was from a zombie movie, her legs and arms stiff, her movements mechanical. My house was only another two blocks. She could wait. I drew tiny trees on the window with my pinkie and added leaves with a fingernail.

The bus pulled in front of my house and let out a deep sigh as the doors opened. I waved goodbye to the girl from my math class and walked to the front, my backpack slapping the edges of the brown seats. Down the steps, to the driveway. I stepped aside a few feet to the mailbox and opened it. Nothing inside. But I pretended there was, sticking my hand in like I was flipping through envelopes, checking the names. I heard the bus pull away and I kept my hand in the empty box a little longer. I thought about the hornets that made a nest inside during the summer, and wondered where bees went during the winter. I sure wouldn't mind migrating to Florida for the winter. Except for Christmas. There had to be snow on Christmas.

I peered over my left shoulder. The bus was almost disappearing in the distance. I dropped my bag in the driveway and started jogging in the direction of the woman. The prairie-zombie woman.

Trenton had sat at the table that morning shoveling eggs into his mouth, feet swinging so hard his chair was nearly rocking. I walked to where she was making a second batch and peered into the pan, smelling some kind of flowery perfume that overpowered the food. There were dashes of green peppers, spots of mushrooms and nearly invisible chunks of onions.

“Grab a plate,” she said. “I made breakfast.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I don’t like onions.” I heard Trenton’s fork clatter to his plate. “He doesn’t either.” I grabbed a hot cocoa packet and travel mug out of the cupboard.

Trenton bit his lip as his eyes grew and filled with tears that didn’t spill over as I filled the mug with hot water.

“You don’t have to finish that,” I told him, dumping the cocoa in the water and turning to dig through another cupboard at the same time.

“I’m still hungry,” he mumbled.

I grabbed two granola bars and set one in front of him.

“Mom knew I don’t like onions,” he said in an eight-year-old kind of whisper, the kind that turns out to be something everyone

in the room can hear.

Aunt Nadine didn't say anything. She dumped half the pan into her own bowl and the other half into the dog's dish, loudly letting the pan slide into the sink. Mugs, my brown bulldog, came up and sniffed the eggs, snorted then walked to sit at my feet with a big sigh.

I tousled Trenton's blonde hair. "I know. She's not Mom."

He smiled a little as he tried to fix his hair again.

The wind caught my hair as I jogged towards the woman in the median, the same Aunt Nadine that had made breakfast with onions that morning. I wondered if she would be in the same normal state of mind that she had been that morning. I slowed down a little, watching the woman still pacing between lanes of traffic. I let a blue pickup go by, looked again and then darted to where she stood.

"Aunt Nadine?" I said, watching her face. If I had to describe anyone as mousy, it would be her. The bridge on her nose was too narrow, pointing it a little upward. Her chin was pointed up too, like she was trying too hard to carry her head up high. I watched the tight crinkles under her eyes loosen as she recognized me.

"Jadyn!" She drew out, "I'm so glad you're here. I was just trying to remember which way to go to get back to the house." She laughed and seemed a little nervous. "Moving in and all that must

have thrown me off.”

I noticed that my shoulders had tensed and I tried unsuccessfully to let them relax. “It’s okay. I’ll walk you home.”

She held out her arm. I hesitated and she looped hers in mine anyway. “Now, what would your Dad say if he knew I had you crossing this busy street by yourself.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m fourteen.”

“Well.” She looked both ways and I pretended to let her lead me across the street, though I looked too. She was supposed to be my caregiver. Yeah, right. I was glad that Trenton’s bus was an hour after mine, because the elementary school day started later than the middle and high school, so that he didn’t have to see his great-aunt wandering in the middle of the street.

We were silent as we walked back and I tried to guess what she was thinking about. I started with extravagant ideas like love and hope and then just decided she was probably trying to think of something to make for dinner—without onions. I wondered how her thoughts meshed together—I imagined they would be like those claw games with the stuffed animals inside, where you tried to grab a particular one, like a cool frog, only you end up missing and getting nothing at all or something completely different.

I used the excuse of having to pick up my bag from the driveway to let go of her arm. I still couldn’t believe Dad didn’t

think I could take care of myself with Mom gone. But then again, I couldn't believe he thought Aunt Nadine was sane enough to be considered as a live-in babysitter either.

SIX MONTHS AGO

Mom is a photographer. Or was. Most people would know just by walking into our living room. One whole wall was shelves, with the TV in the middle. On both sides were dozens of black and white photos in white and silver frames. Looking at the shelves was like seeing into a hundred moments all at once. My first steps across Grandma's living room. Me with dinner—spaghetti—on my face. Bike rides, beach days. Fourth grade graduation decked out in construction paper caps and yarn tassels.

Every time someone new would come over, they would gravitate to those shelves, amazed.

Black photo albums filled the entire bottom shelf of the coffee table too, all labeled with dates. Some people said she was obsessed. I said she was good. Photography was like a part of her, like the little mole on her cheek that seemed to jump up and down as she laughed. Sometimes, she would let me use her camera for the art fair at school, but mine never turned out as good as hers. I guess it wasn't as much a part of me as it was of her.

I dropped to the floor and reached for an album, tucking my

feet under me. A thin layer of dust covered the top and I frowned. Mom used to clean them at least once a week.

The car accident had been weeks ago. People had stopped to bring in casseroles, cleaned our kitchen and bathrooms—just not her pictures.

I walked to the kitchen. Mugs followed me, her ID tags clinking together. We had gotten her as a family dog, but for some reason, she just liked to follow me everywhere.

I put my back to the cupboard and pressed my palms to the counter. Straightening my arms, I slid my butt onto the surface and opened the cabinet over the sink. I pulled out the feather duster and jumped down all in one movement. I retreated back to the albums, my bare feet slapping against the tile, then dragging along the carpet.

I began to pull each album out, running the duster across the covers and binder. I sat down, my legs folded underneath me, and Mugs put her face on my thigh, blue eyes peering up at me from her folds of skin.

I flipped a few albums open and glimpsed through a couple of the pages. Dad had pulled a few of the albums out to get pictures of Mom for the funeral and hadn't put them back in order. He didn't find very many photos, the display was small—she usually stood behind the camera. My favorite photo had been tacked to the

corner of the display, though, the one where she looked the most like me. Her hair fell straight to her shoulders, but her green eyes caught a shimmer of light.

I pulled out the album from my parents' wedding and began to stack them in order, setting them down quietly. I paused at the one from the year I turned seven. The year mom took me to the “attention doctor.”

I flipped through the pictures, running my hand over the one of me holding the pink walkie-talkie Mom gave me when Trenton was born—so I could talk to her when I missed her the night she stayed at the hospital. I wondered now what I would have done when I realized she was still too far away for the little box to work.

As I reached my brother's second birthday in the albums, the ordered stack threatened to topple. I stood and stretched my arms towards the ceiling, then the floor. A thousand needles seemed to poke through the calluses on the bottoms of my feet, running all the way up my legs.

I started moving the single stack into two so they wouldn't fall. The silver writing labeling each book matched the silver frames on the wall over the fireplace. Our family photo of the four of us was the biggest. Mom had taken that one too—her hands were tucked behind her back because she used a remote. We had been on vacation and the sun set across the Pacific Ocean behind

us. Mom had Photoshopped it so that only the colors of the sunset were there, everything else was black and white. The purples, yellows and reds in the sky matched the pillows on the couches and the yellow on the walls. Mom liked everything to be perfect. And it seemed like it was, except she wasn't there anymore to keep it that way.

I walked over to the big photo and ran my finger along the edge of the frame. On each side hung smaller shots of our extended family, my dad's on one side and mom's on the other. A thin layer of dust covered each of them. And I hated that dust. The realization bothered me.

The little dull pieces of dirt were another reminder that Mom wasn't there. Everyone always said they didn't know how she managed to keep the house so clean. I wasn't supposed to be sitting in the living room armed with a bunch of pink feathers on a handle on a perfectly good sunny day. I grabbed the duster and took each frame off the wall, stacking them to put them back up after I'd cleaned them.

I should be out riding bikes or doing something with Ellie and Avery, I told myself. They had been my best friends since kindergarten. Ellie's real name is Nayeli which is Native American for "I love you" or something like that. Her mom is a Native American professor at the local college. Ellie hates her

name—that’s where ‘Ellie’ comes in—but her mom refuses to call her that.

A photo of the three of us sat on the shelves by the TV and I leaned the largest frame against the fireplace to look for it. I found it on the middle shelf and carefully pulled it out. I sat on a swing, Ellie behind me and Avery behind her. We were about eight. Avery’s face is more defined now and his hair isn’t blonde, it’s brown. Ellie wasn’t a stick anymore either.

I placed the photo on the carpet and picked up the next. My sixth birthday party. Me, Ellie and a few of the other girls were all wearing dresses and tiaras. That was back when I used to let my mom put me in a dress. I began to take all of the pictures down so I could dust the shelves and then the frames. I don’t remember exactly when that—the whole wearing a dress thing—stopped. I wore a black dress to Mom’s funeral, because I knew if she’d seen me, she’d have done that thing she always did when I dressed up, drawing out my name out real long. “Gorgeous,” she’d say. “J-a-d-y-n, gorgeous.” My thoughts skipped back to the day we buried her.

“Jadyn! Jadyn Remley!” My heart jumped into my throat as I realized Dad’s voice wasn’t echoing in my thoughts but in the living room. The frame I had slipped out of my fingers. I bent down to pick it back up.

Mugs barked.

“Sorry,” I turned to him. “You scared me.”

His forehead crinkled like Mugs’. “What are you doing?”

I shrugged, puzzled at why his voice seemed to be rising. “I was just dusting Mom’s photos.”

“Just dusting? Jadyn, this is a mess.”

My eyes darted around the room. One stack of albums had toppled, some books lying open. Exposed. The other tower reminded me of Mr. Hertzler's 45 degree angle drawings. Half the frames from the wall were lying on the floor and two dozen frames were standing on the carpet.

A kaleidoscope of memories at my feet.

I stared back at my toes. “I’m sorry. I just saw they needed to be cleaned and then I got distracted and...”

He pulled off his work shoes. “What don’t you understand about the fact that you are supposed to finish one thing before you begin another?”

“I’m sorry,” I said again, though I didn’t really feel it. “I just forgot about the other things I’d started.

He shook his head and threw his loafers into the closet. “Clean it up.”

Two days later, we inherited her. It was after ten o’clock but I couldn’t sleep. I could hear my dad and his cousin Jasper talking in

the kitchen. I slid my feet across the carpet to the upside-down L of light coming from the door.

“...she needs someone to keep checking on her, but she’s fine,” Jasper quickly added. “She may not remember your name sometimes or where she put the sugar, but face it—you need help with the kids, she needs a little help. It’s perfect.”

“I don’t know.”

I heard a chair scrape across the kitchen tile and pictured my dad wandering around the table, his laugh lines deep like they always were when he was thinking.

“I am not that forgetful,” a new voice said. I scrunched my nose. I couldn’t place the voice, though it was a little raspy and definitely old. I slowly crept towards the door and put my face up to the crack.

Dad paced; Jasper sat with both elbows on the table. A gray haired woman sat with her back to me. I scrunched my face again but then noticed she had four rings on just one hand and her shirt looked like someone vomited a medley of oranges and purples on it.

Great-Aunt Nadine. Out of all the extended family members, Mom seemed to stick with her the most. They went to lunch at the local diner every Friday. That’s where they were going when the truck ran the red light. Aunt Nadine walked away. Mom didn’t.

“The kids aren’t going to like it,” Dad said.

“But they need someone to keep an eye on them,” Jasper said, “You yourself said that you came home to one of Jady’s disasters the other day.”

One of my disasters? I leaned back on my heels, wondering just how many “disasters” I had on my record.

“Most of the time, she still knows who she is,” he continued. There was something in his voice that made him sound desperate, like he was trying to give away a puppy without letting on that it bites and pees on the floor.

I scrunched my forehead. What did that mean?

“I *am* still here,” Aunt Nadine said. I knew how she felt. “Let me stay here for a week, if it doesn’t work out, then you can change your mind.”

Dad ran his fingers through his thinning hair. “All right,” it came out in a rush of air, sounding more like a sigh than a let’s-shake-hands agreement.

I bit my lip, unsure what to think, but turned and ran to my room before Dad caught me eavesdropping and called this another one of my “disasters.”

THREE MONTHS AGO

I slid into my spot at the lunch table so fast I almost went right

off the other side, my tray clattering loud, my unopened chocolate milk tipping over. I picked it up quickly, drawing in a big gasp of air. “I thought lunch would never get here.”

Ellie rolled her eyes. “I know. Science went on for forever.”

“I would’ve traded you for my art class any day.” Avery sat his lunch down—a plain brown paper bag—and sat down in the chair next to me, one of those round stools connected to the cafeteria table. “Mr. Kennedy thought my painting of an atom was a star.”

“Maybe that’s because you can’t paint,” I said, and instantly felt a kick to my left shin under the table. I rubbed my right foot over what I was certain was going to turn into a bruise. “Ow. I was going to add that you are probably the only one in the freshman class who could draw an atom without looking at a diagram.”

“Not just an atom, a carbon atom.”

Ellie rolled her eyes. Avery was probably the only person I knew—or maybe even the only person in the U.S.—that could watch a football game and rattle off exactly how much force the ball needed to be thrown that far for a touchdown. And probably the only person in my grade that wanted to be a physicist—or even knew what that meant.

“So, Jadie,” Ellie said, her voice cheery like she was intentionally changing the subject. “My mom said she could take us to the mall this weekend, so you should ask your parents if you

can come.” Ellie paused mid-chew, probably realizing she’d just said “parents” plural without even thinking.

“Yeah, sure,” I said quickly, trying to ignore her mistake and drenching a chicken nugget in barbecue sauce. I wasn’t hungry anymore, a knot in my stomach making me feel sick. And I loved chicken nugget day.

“Jadie, I’m sorry,” Ellie started and I realized I had been staring at my tray for a full minute without taking another bite. “It just kinda came out that way.” Ellie and Avery were both silent for a few minutes then, the noise of the cafeteria seeming muffled, like everyone else was on the other side of a long tunnel.

I knew that losing Mom would hurt, that I’d miss her. What I didn’t know was how bad it would feel when even Ellie and Avery didn’t know what to say to me, how everyone at school would give me space, whisper about “the girl whose mom died.” How I’d wonder if someone was talking to me because they wanted to or because they felt bad for me, like they would feel bad for a lonely puppy in a shelter.

I cleared my throat and took a big bite of a nugget, though the sauce had sat on it so long it was both soggy and gritty at the same time.