*Me, God and Mattie*

Chapter 1:

Morning Silence

The first light of dawn peeked through the curtains as Sara reached for the alarm. For a fleeting moment, she lay still, savoring the quiet—a calm before the storm of the day ahead. But the peace was short-lived. Her mind, as always, began ticking through the list of things waiting for her: Liam’s breakfast, packing his bag for May’s house, and the constant attention required to navigate her son’s unique world.

With a soft sigh, she slid out of bed, her feet touching the cool hardwood floor. The weight of the day was already pressing down on her shoulders. She walked across the room to pull on her robe, the fabric familiar and comforting. Reaching the window, she pulled open the curtain and looked out at the world.

The sun was just beginning to paint the sky in hues of orange and pink. It was the kind of morning she might have cherished years ago, before life became so complicated.

Her house, a once impressive two-story Victorian, had seen better days. The paint was peeling in spots, and the roof was due for repairs, but it was home. Every corner held memories, some warm and others bittersweet.

As she stepped inside, the familiar creak of the floorboards greeted her, a sound that wrapped around her like an old friend’s embrace. Each room whispered secrets, tales of laughter and tear-stained nights, all etched into the very walls. The living room, with its faded floral wallpaper, still held the remnants of family gatherings—voices rising in joy, the warmth of shared stories weaving a tapestry of belonging. Now, it felt eerily silent, the once vibrant energy replaced by a hushed stillness that lingered in the air.

The kitchen, her sanctuary, beckoned her. It was where she had spent countless hours, cooking with the rhythm of a home full of life. But now, all that remained was a faint scent of coffee mingling with nostalgia, residual evidence of mornings spent with loved ones over steaming mugs. She poured herself a cup, the process familiar and comforting, and allowed the warmth to seep into her fingers. Gazing out the window, she followed the trail of sunlight as it danced across the garden, which had once flourished with bright blooms and lively butterflies. Now it lay overgrown, nature reclaiming its territory, yet even in its wild state, it told the story of resilience.

Sipping her coffee, she wandered to the dining room, where the long oak table bore the scars of countless celebrations and everyday meals. It felt heavy with unshared moments, with empty chairs now symbols of absence. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to drift back to one particular night—birthdays filled with laughter, the clinking of glasses, and her mother’s voice rising above the jubilant chaos. A bittersweet smile tugged at her lips as she recalled how they used to dance in the living room, twirling around as if the world outside didn’t exist.

As the sun began its descent, casting golden light through the dusty panes, she turned her gaze upward, drawn toward the staircase. The steps led to the places where dreams had been whispered and secrets kept. She moved slowly, each step a reminder of what had been lost yet also of what could still be found. The bedrooms, once filled with giggles and late-night confessions, now stood quietly, holding onto their memories like sacred treasures.

With a gentle sigh, she stepped onto the worn carpet of her childhood room, the walls adorned with peeling stickers and faded photographs. It was here that she had drawn her first pictures, penned her first stories, and dreamed of all that life could be. She sank onto the bed, its mattress sagging yet oddly comforting. There, surrounded by remnants of her past, she felt a flicker of hope. The house, despite its decline, held the essence of who she was—a vessel of memories that still breathed life.

In that moment, she realized that although time had taken its toll, the spirit of her home remained intact. Just as she too was still here, carrying the weight of joy and sorrow, learning to dance through it all, just as her mother had taught her. With determination swelling within her, she stood, clutching her coffee cup like a lifeline. The peeling paint and sagging roof may seek her attention, but it was her heart, fortified by love and memory, that would guide her in restoring not just the house, but the vibrant spirit that once filled its rooms.

You could almost hear the echoes of the past if you listened closely. The kitchen, the heart of the house, had been the hub for all things family. It was where Sunday breakfast laid the groundwork for laughter that danced through the air, the clinking of forks on plates harmonizing with the excited chatter about the week ahead. Morning light would flood through the window, illuminating the dust motes as they floated lazily by, but now it had all quieted down. That familiar aroma of coffee still lingered, a bittersweet reminder of early mornings spent chatting over steaming mugs, though now it was less about shared stories and more about silence filled with nostalgia.

She leaned back against the old wooden counter, running her fingers over the worn surface, feeling the grooves and scars that told a tale of countless meals cooked in a rush, of midnight snacks shared with friends, and of baking disasters that turned into sweet, sweet memories. The old clock on the wall ticked softly, a reminder that time, like her home, kept moving forward, whether she was ready for it or not.

Outside, the overgrown garden was a jungle of weeds and wildflowers that seemed to thrive in their freedom. It was once immaculate, filled with carefully tended blooms, bright and alive, but now nature had taken over, reclaiming its territory with a riot of colors and an air of rebellion. She could almost picture her grandmother stooped over the rose bushes, hands in the soil, coaxing blooms from the earth with a gentle touch.

“Maybe I should start with the roses,” she mused aloud, a small smile creeping onto her face. It was a scared thought, one that nudged her to breathe life back into the house, to awaken those memories that had grown dusty and dim. And just like that, the idea of picking up the paintbrush again, of breathing fresh color onto the faded walls, sparked a flicker of excitement deep within her.

After all, home isn’t just where the heart is; it’s where the stories live and breathe. And this old Victorian was filled to the brim with tales waiting to be told, memories begging for a resurrection. With a determined nod, she grabbed her jacket and stepped outside, ready to face the wild garden. It was time to reclaim not just the house but all the laughter, love, and lessons that came with it. The past held its weight, but she was ready to lighten it up, one rose at a time.

Sara moved through the house with practiced ease, her feet tracing paths worn by years of routine. She reached the bathroom and caught her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes, once bright with dreams, now held a dullness that was hard to ignore. She ran a hand over her face, brushing away remnants of sleep, and thought about the day ahead.

Her thoughts turned to Liam. Her precious boy, still asleep in his room, was her everything. His eyes, so much like his father’s, were bright and full of curiosity, yet they carried a depth she often struggled to understand. Sara sighed as she thought of the challenges they’d face today.

Liam lived in a world of silence, not by choice, but by the hands of fate. Diagnosed with severe autism at an early age, he communicated through gestures, expressions, and behaviors. Over the years, Sara had learned to interpret his silent language: the flapping of his hands when he was excited, the rhythmic rocking when he was anxious, and the intense focus on his toys when he needed to calm himself. These small cues were their secret language, a fragile bridge connecting their two worlds.

She had known long before the doctor said it. The silence, the absence of babbling. When the word “autism” came, it wasn’t a revelation—it was confirmation. The future she’d imagined collapsed in a single breath, replaced by something uncharted, something fragile

But if there was one thing Sara had learned, it was how to adapt. She found ways to connect with Liam, to navigate his world. And yet, her heart still ached with the longing to hear his voice, to understand his thoughts, his dreams, and his fears. For now, she had to be content with the little ways he let her in—a fleeting smile, a shared glance, or the way he clung to her hand when he felt overwhelmed.

As she left the bathroom, her mind wandered to Grandma May. The older woman’s faith had always been a source of tension between them. May believed that God had a plan for Liam, that his silence was part of some divine purpose. Like last week, during one of Liam’s quiet play times, he had lined up his blocks with meticulous care. When Sara looked down at the arrangement he had spelled out the word “GOD” with the colorful letters.

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“Where did you hear that?” Sara’s voice came out sharper than she intended. Liam didn’t answer, of course, but she knew exactly where it had come from. May.

Sara stormed into the kitchen where her grandmother was stirring a pot of soup, oblivious.

“Are you telling Liam about God?”

May glanced up. “I didn’t tell him anything, Sara.”

“Then why is he spelling it with his blocks?”

May set her spoon down carefully, folding her hands in front of her. “Maybe it’s not about what I told him. Maybe it’s about what he already knows.”Sara, on the other hand, struggled to reconcile such ideas with the reality of their lives. She loved May dearly, but the constant religious undertones in their conversations were becoming gharder to tolerate.

Shaking her head, Sara pushed the thought aside and opened the door to Liam’s room. The morning light streamed in through the window, casting soft shadows across the walls. Liam lay curled up in his bed, Mattie, his teddy bear and constant companion, tucked under his arm. Sara approached quietly, brushing his hair away from his forehead. His eyes fluttered open, and a small smile spread across his lips when he saw her.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she said softly, her voice gentle and steady. Liam didn’t respond, but his smile lingered, warming her heart. He reached out, his hand coming to rest on Mattie. Sara watched him, her love for him swelling with every beat of her heart.

The rest of the morning passed in a familiar rhythm. Sara helped Liam through his routine, the two of them moving in a silent dance. She made him breakfast, helped him dress, and watched as he interacted with Mattie. These mornings were a blend of joy and sorrow, filled with unspoken words and unbreakable bonds. Sara knew she couldn’t change Liam’s world, but she could be his anchor, his safe haven in the storm.

She glanced at the clock that sat above the kitchen window and took a deep breath. James was late again. James had always been a hard worker but ever since he had starting taking on extra hours in the early mornings Sara felt it added another layer of stress to an already anxiety-ridden day.

Sara felt the familiar knot of frustration forming in her stomach. James's being late was becoming a regular occurrence. She understood his job was demanding, but so was their life at home. With every minute he was late, Sara felt the weight of their reality pressing down upon her. She worried about Liam, the impact James's absence had on him, and how his tardiness today would affect their son's medical visit.

Liam's condition had strained their bond, pressing down on them with an unanticipated weight. They had always been a team, facing life's challenges together. But lately, Sara felt like she was carrying the burden alone.

She missed the man she had fallen in love with, the man who had promised to share all of life's burdens with her. His late arrivals and frequent absences had left her feeling isolated, a single soldier fighting a battle she was unsure she could win. She needed his support, his strength, and his love. But at that moment, she only had his apologies.

She tried to shield Liam from her frustration, turning her attention back to him, and helping him line up his trains. His excitement was infectious, and she forced a smile onto her face, hoping to reassure him that everything was okay. But beneath her calm exterior, Sara felt the strain of their situation pulling at her seams.

Her mind was filled with hope and fear. Hope for a breakthrough at the doctor's appointment, for answers that might help them better understand Liam's condition. And fear of the unknown, of what the future might hold for their son and for them as a family.

The sound of the front door opening brought her back to reality. James was home, his face a mix of guilt and exhaustion. Sara looked at him, her heart heavy with unspoken words. But now wasn't the time for that conversation. Now was the time to focus on Liam, on finding the answers they so desperately needed. James walked into the room, already offering an apology. "I know I'm late," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Traffic was backed up, and ... I'm sorry, Sara."

"It always is, James," she replied, her tone resigned but not unkind. She took a deep breath, trying to keep the frustration from creeping into her voice. "Just please get Liam to May’s house. Tell her I’m leaving work at 1:00 pm to meet them at the doctor’s office."

James nodded, glancing over at Liam, who was still engrossed in his toy trains. “I will,” he promised, his voice softer. He reached out, gently squeezing Sara’s hand. “We’ll be there on time. I promise.”

Sara gave a faint smile, pulling her hand away as she moved to gather her things. She needed to get to work, to distract herself from the gnawing anxiety that had become all too familiar. "I’ll see you later," she said, her voice distant as she walked out the door, leaving James alone with Liam.

As the door closed behind her, James let out a long sigh, turning his attention to their son. He watched Liam for a moment, feeling the weight of the morning's tension settling over him like a heavy blanket. He had been late too many times, and he knew it was wearing on Sara. But there was no time to dwell on that now. He needed to get Liam to May’s house, and he needed to do it quickly.

"Alright, buddy," James said, crouching down to Liam’s level. "Time to go to Grandma May’s."

Liam didn’t respond, but he didn’t resist when James gently took his hand, guiding him toward the door. As they stepped outside, James felt a pang of guilt. He knew he should have been more present, more reliable. But every day felt like a race against the clock, and he was always just a little too late.

Chapter 2

Strong and Silent

James guided Liam through the front door, his son’s small hand soft and trusting in his own. They stepped into the crisp morning air, and James’s mind churned with everything unsaid, the tension from his exchange with Sara hanging heavy. He’d felt the warmth of her hand before she’d pulled away, a small gesture, but enough to remind him of the distance that had grown between them. She’d become so good at hiding her disappointment, at burying it under quick words and quiet smiles, but he could still feel it, like a whisper that lingered after she’d left.

He led Liam to the car, guiding him into the seat and buckling him in with practiced care. Just as he clicked the buckle in place, Liam looked up, then pointed at Mattie, cradled in his arms.

“Of course, buddy,” James said with a soft smile. Gently, he took Mattie from Liam and placed him in the empty seat beside him, securing the seatbelt with the same care. “There we go. Mattie’s all set for the ride, too.” Liam watched, his gaze intent, and only after Mattie was safely buckled did he relax, fingers smoothing the bear’s ear with a calm, familiar rhythm. James had come to understand these routines, small rituals that helped Liam make sense of his world. They were simple acts, but they carried so much weight. In Liam’s universe, these habits weren’t just rituals; they were anchors, and James was grateful to be part of them, even in this small way.

Settling into the driver’s seat, James took a moment to collect himself, hands gripping the wheel as he went over the day’s plan in his mind. He knew today mattered, not only for Liam’s well-being but for Sara’s peace of mind. Her worry about Liam’s imaginary friend was subtle but there, and he sensed that she feared others might view it as something peculiar, even concerning. He wanted Dr. Olive to understand their son, to see the unique, beautiful complexity behind Liam’s silent demeanor. But as he thought about what lay ahead, the familiar gnawing sensation crept up.

Did Sara grab the insurance cards? Should I check the coverage again? The questions tumbled through his mind, irrational but persistent, until he felt a bitter echo of his father’s voice rising from his memories: “What kind of man are you going to be? You’ll disappoint people your whole life.”

His hands tightened around the wheel. The guilt never left—it sat in his chest, a weight he carried like a name he couldn’t say out loud. He had let his brother drown. He was letting Sara slip away. He was failing Liam, too. J

He glanced into the rearview mirror, catching sight of Liam, who was still focused on Mattie, his little hands gently tugging at her ear as he rocked slightly in his seat. He felt his heart clench as he watched his son, a quiet love mingling with the ache of responsibility that settled deeper every day. Liam’s world was vast, intricate, and just beyond reach, but it was his, and James had come to respect its boundaries.

As he turned onto the main road, James’s thoughts drifted to Sara, to the life they’d built and the struggles that had come with it. He remembered how they’d been in the early years, young and full of plans, brimming with a hope that felt unbreakable. They’d dreamed of a future filled with adventure, with children, with endless possibilities. But dreams had a way of changing, reshaping themselves into something more complicated. They hadn’t anticipated the sleepless nights, the worry that would consume them, the quiet burden that had settled on their shoulders as they faced Liam’s diagnosis.

Sara had always been his rock, the one who held them together when he felt like he was falling apart. She was the strong one, steady in ways he envied but could never replicate. And yet, he’d watched that strength turn into something different over the years, something weighed down by exhaustion. He hated that he’d become part of that weight, that his failures—his lateness, his inability to be fully present—had chipped away at the trust she’d placed in him.

James adjusted his grip on the steering wheel, guilt tugging at him as he recalled the times he’d been absent, wrapped up in work, or buried under his own doubts. Sara needed him, now more than ever, and he’d spent too long letting his anxieties pull him away, creating a distance he feared might be too great to bridge. He wished he could tell her how much he admired her resilience, how her patience with Liam left him in awe, but the words always felt tangled, inadequate.

He cleared his throat, breaking the silence. “Ready to go see Grandma May, buddy?” he asked, his tone light, a small attempt to connect.

Liam didn’t respond, his attention still fixed on Mattie, but he gave a slight nod. James smiled to himself, savoring the small connection, knowing that for Liam, even a nod was a gesture of trust.

It was a peaceful morning drive through the familiar streets, each corner holding memories of a life built in small, careful steps. James thought about the road ahead, the challenges they still had to face, and the promise he’d made himself to be the father Liam needed. He wanted to be the man his son could rely on, the man his wife deserved, not the shadow of a father he remembered, the one whose legacy he’d spent his life fighting against.

Chapter 3

May’s Faith

May was already awake long before the morning light touched the windows of her old home. She liked to say it was the Lord that woke her up early, though Sara would roll her eyes whenever May mentioned it. May didn’t mind; she had long since stopped trying to restrain herself for the sake of what other people thought.. Faith was something you had to live out-loud so that other people would experience it through you and want more .

Her knees creaked as she stood up from her armchair—the one by the window that overlooked the small garden she’d tended to since moving here. She’d raised Sara in this house, nurtured her from a wide-eyed girl to the woman she was now—a mother herself, though one constantly caught in the rush of life’s trials. May had done her best, but sometimes she wondered if she could have done more, especially now with everything going on with Liam.

As she put on her slippers and shuffled to the kitchen, the memory of her daughter drifted into her thoughts. Sara’s mother, her beloved Catherine, had been so full of faith. Catherine had always believed that God had a plan, even when that plan took her from this earth far too soon. May could still hear her daughter’s voice—steady, unwavering—as she faced her cancer diagnosis. “It’s all in God’s hands, Mama,” she had said.

May's chest tightened as she recalled those final months. Catherine had been so brave, clinging to her faith with every ounce of strength left in her body. But when Catherine passed, Sara, just eight years old, had closed herself off from God completely. It had been like a door shutting—sudden and firm. May had tried to keep faith alive in Sara’s heart, but grief had hardened her. May couldn't blame her, not really. Losing a mother at such a young age could tear anyone’s heart apart. Even after all these years, May clung to hope that Sara might one day find her way back to God.

She poured water into the kettle, her hands working methodically. Her thoughts drifted to Liam, her precious great-grandson. When Sara told her that Liam had spelled out GOD with his blocks, May didn’t know what to think. It was a moment that had filled her with hope, but also with questions. Was it just a coincidence, or was there something more at work? She was not one to believe in coincidence.

“He’s got a friend now,” May whispered, half to herself, as she poured her tea. But this time, her voice lacked the certainty it once had. She didn’t want to jump to conclusions, not yet. She had learned over the years that God’s ways were mysterious, and sometimes what seemed clear at first could turn out to be something else entirely.

Sinking back into her armchair, May sipped her tea, trying to sort through her thoughts. Was Liam really being guided by something divine, or was his new "friend" a creation of his imagination—a way for him to process the world in his own quiet way? May didn’t know. She had faith, yes, but even she wasn’t sure what to make of this. She wanted to believe that God was reaching out to Liam, but what if it wasn’t what she thought?

May sighed, settling deeper into her chair as the warm morning sun began to light the room. Maybe it was too soon to tell. She had to be careful, especially around Sara. Her granddaughter had long since abandoned any belief in a higher power, ever since Catherine's death. If May pressed too hard, it would only push Sara further away—something she couldn’t bear.

As she stared out the window, watching the light slowly spread across the garden, May’s mind drifted back to the day Sara had shut her out, spiritually. At Catherine’s funeral, May had held Sara close, whispering prayers in her ear, hoping to soothe the raw edges of her grief. But Sara had sat there, her eyes hollow, untouched by the hymns or the words of comfort. That was the moment May felt the door to Sara’s heart slam shut.

She closed her eyes, a soft prayer escaping her lips. “Lord, I don’t know what you’re doing with Liam, but I trust you. Help me see what You’re trying to show us. And help Sara find her way back to You.” The prayer was simple, but filled with all the longing she had carried for years.

Just as she settled deeper into her chair, the sound of tires crunching on gravel reached her ears. It must be James, finally bringing Liam over. May grinned to herself, eager to see her great-grandson, though she knew James wouldn’t be staying long. He never did. The boy worked too hard, poor thing. May didn’t understand why James always seemed a step behind, his good intentions swallowed by his weariness. Sara deserved someone who could shoulder the load beside her, not someone who added to it. But May held her tongue. It wasn’t her place to say anything.

The door creaked open, and in a few moments, there stood Liam, with James gently guiding him into the room. Liam’s hand gripped Mattie the teddy bear, as usual, his eyes darting around, taking in the familiar sights.

“Morning, May,” James said, his voice weary. He gave her a brief nod before heading back toward the door. “I’ll be back to pick him up after work.”

“Take care, James,” May called out, though she knew her words would float right past him.

Liam stayed near the door for a moment, his eyes focused on the floor as he rocked slightly on his feet. May smiled warmly, patting the cushion beside her. “Come on over here, sweet boy. Grandmas got some cookies for you.”

Liam moved toward her; his steps tentative but sure. When he reached her side, May reached out and gently brushed a hand over his hair. He didn’t pull away, and that was enough for her.

“You know,” she said softly, leaning closer as if sharing a secret, “I’ve been wondering about your friend. He seems very special, doesn’t he?”

Liam’s eyes flicked up at her, just for a moment. May’s heart swelled, though she still felt that nagging uncertainty.

“Maybe one day,” she continued, “you’ll tell me more about him. I think we both have a lot to learn.”

Liam didn’t respond, but his fingers tightened around Mattie, and for now, that was enough. May would wait. She would wait for God to reveal whatever it was He had planned—both for Liam, and for her.

She leaned back into the cushions, glancing at the clock. They had a few hours before time to meet Sara and James at the new doctor’s office. May wasn’t sure what this appointment would reveal, but she knew how important it was for all of them. A lot had been weighing on Sara’s mind, and while she didn’t say it out loud, May could sense the deep worry gnawing at her granddaughter.

“Time will tell,” May whispered to herself, casting a glance at Liam, who was now curled up with his cookies in a neat half-circle in front of the television.

“Lord, be with us today,” May whispered, her voice trembling slightly. “I hope this new doctor is as good as she’s supposed to be. Sara can’t take another disappointment. And Liam... he deserves a world that understands him.” She glanced at her great-grandson, curled up with Mattie and his cookies, and felt the weight of the day pressing heavy on her heart.

Chapter 4

The Door to Hope

Sara pulled into the parking lot of the medical complex; her grip tight on the steering wheel. The morning had gone by in a blur, filled with the usual quiet routines with Liam and the undercurrent of anxiety about today. This appointment had been looming in her mind for weeks now, and the anticipation felt heavy in her chest.

As she turned into a spot near the front, her eyes scanned the entrance of the building. She was surprised to see James pacing back and forth on the sidewalk, his hands shoved deep into his coat pockets. His brow was furrowed in thought, his steps hurried, but he was there—on time, no…he was early. For the first time in weeks, Sara felt the weight on her chest ease, just a little. Maybe he was trying—trying to make things better, trying to meet her where she was. It wasn’t much, but it was enough for now. A small, relieved smile tugged at Sara’s lips.

"Thank you, James," she whispered to herself, her words barely audible over the hum of the car's engine. She quickly switched it off and stepped out, pulling her bag from the passenger seat and slinging it over her shoulder. For once, she felt a flicker of hope—a small, fragile thing—that maybe they could face this day together.

James caught sight of her and gave a half-hearted wave, his pacing slowing as she walked toward him. His expression was still tight with worry, but at least he was here. That meant something.

“Hey,” she said softly as she approached him. “You’re early.”

James shrugged, a faint smile breaking through his otherwise tense face. “Didn’t want to risk being late again. Not today.”

Sara nodded, touched by the gesture. She knew how hard it was for him to get away from work, and how much he wanted to be a good father despite the constant demands pulling him in every direction. She leaned in, brushing her hand gently against his arm.

Before they could say more, the familiar sight of May’s old car came into view, pulling into a spot just a few spaces down. Sara’s stomach tightened just a little more. She could see Liam through the window, carefully climbing out of the car, clutching Mattie in his hand like a lifeline. May followed closely behind, walking slowly, watching Liam as he moved with his usual precision—carefully avoiding the cracks and lines on the sidewalk as if they might somehow disrupt his world.

Sara gave a little sigh. She loved her son fiercely, but these small, peculiar behaviors always left her wondering—wondering what went on in that beautiful, silent mind of his.

“Here they come,” James murmured beside her, straightening up as May and Liam approached.

Liam’s face was focused, his eyes glued to the ground as he navigated the pathway toward them. Mattie dangled from his grip, his little hand absently stroking the bear’s ear as they walked. May hovered a few steps behind, her sharp eyes observing everything, a quiet smile on her lips.

“Good morning,” May greeted them, her voice calm, though Sara could sense the tension underneath.

“Morning, May,” Sara replied, her voice warmer than it usually was with her grandmother. Today was not the day for old arguments or frustrations. Today, they were united in their worry for Liam.

Liam finally looked up, his eyes briefly meeting Sara’s before darting away again. Sara bent down to his level, offering her hand.

“Ready to see Dr. Olive?” she asked, her voice soft and encouraging. Liam didn’t respond, but his grip tightened on Mattie, his small way of saying he understood. Sara straightened back up, sharing a brief glance with May.

“Let’s get inside,” James said, already heading for the door.The waiting room was bright, sterile, and far too quiet for Sara’s liking. It always felt a little too perfect in these medical buildings, as if the carefully chosen plants and soft music could somehow erase the fear that patients carried in with them.

Sara’s eyes darted to the fish tank in the corner, the silent, shimmering fish gliding through the water. It was oddly soothing, yet her thoughts kept circling back to Liam.

Sara clenched her hands together. Another doctor. Another round of waiting. She risked a glance at James—his fingers tapped restlessly on his knee. May sat stone-still beside them. No one spoke. They were all holding their breath.

They all sat together, the three adults exchanging worried glances while Liam occupied himself with Mattie. He sat in the chair beside May, his feet swinging just off the ground as he concentrated on stroking the bear’s fur. Every so often, he would glance toward the fish tank in the corner, fascinated by the silent world inside the glass.

After a few minutes of waiting, the door to the office opened, and a nurse called out, “Liam Harper?”

Sara felt her heart skip a beat as they stood, their little family rising together. James placed a reassuring hand on Sara’s back as they followed the nurse down the hallway, past the doors and medical rooms that smelled faintly of antiseptic. The knot in Sara’s stomach tightened.

Dr. Olive’s office was at the end of the hall. It was spacious but warm, with shelves of books lining the walls and small, colorful toys scattered across a low table in the corner. The doctor herself sat behind a large wooden desk, her expression kind but alert. She was a tall woman, with sharp eyes and a welcoming smile that made Sara feel like maybe—just maybe—they were in the right place.

“Good morning,” Dr. Olive greeted them as they entered. “Please, come in, have a seat.”

They sat down, and Sara immediately felt the weight of the moment settling over them all. This was the woman—the doctor—who had been celebrated for her groundbreaking work with autistic children.

She was renowned for her innovative methods and unorthodox approach, always pushing the boundaries of what was possible in the treatment and care of children like Liam. Sara had read articles about her and watched interviews, and it had taken months to get this appointment.

But now, sitting here in front of Dr. Olive, Sara felt the full weight of her hope pressing in on her. She wanted so badly for this to be the answer—this doctor, this appointment, this moment. Her hands instinctively reached for Liam’s, and he didn’t pull away. His little fingers curled around hers, and she held on tight.

“So,” Dr. Olive began, her tone calm but curious ,”Let’s get started, I’d like to hear more about Liam and what has brought us here today.”

Sara exchanged a glance with James, and then took a deep breath, steadying herself. “It’s Liam,” she started, her voice quieter than she had expected. “He’s…he’s been making sounds. Utterances, really, but it’s more than he’s ever done before. And I…I think he’s trying to talk.”

Dr. Olive’s eyebrows lifted slightly, her expression focused as she leaned forward, resting her hands on the desk. “Utterances?” she repeated. “How long has this been happening?”

“A few months now,” Sara explained. “It’s not frequent, and it’s not always clear, but I think…I think he’s trying to say something. He’s never spoken before, and the other doctors—they said he’d probably talk by age three. Then it was maybe by age six, and now…now they don’t know if he’ll ever speak at all.”

The room felt charged with unspoken emotion. Sara glanced at May, who nodded gently, her eyes filled with a hope that Sara hadn’t seen in a long time. James sat still beside her, listening intently but remaining quiet, his expression hard to read.

Dr. Olive studied them all for a moment before turning her gaze back to Liam. He sat there, still holding Mattie, his eyes flitting around the room but never settling on anyone. She smiled softly at him.

“Well,” Dr. Olive said, her voice thoughtful, “I’d like to take some time to get to know Liam one on one today if that’s ok.”

“Would that be ok with you Liam? We can play some fun games and your teddy bear friend will be right here playing along with us”, she asked in a soft. friendly voice.

Liam responded with a simple head nod.

“I’ll have my assistant escort you to our family room while Liam and I can get to know each other a little better. It shouldn’t be too long”, she assured them as she stood and gestured toward the hallway.

Chapter 5

The Silent Conversation

Dr. Olive had seen many children like Liam before—bright, curious, yet locked in worlds that were difficult to navigate for anyone on the outside. She was known for her ability to connect with these children, for her willingness to try anything new, unafraid to venture into experimental approaches where conventional methods fell short.

Today, however, felt different. As Liam sat across from her, she sensed something unusual, something she couldn’t quite place. He was calm, his eyes darting around the room, never quite meeting hers. He held Mattie close, his fingers brushing the bear’s fur rhythmically, grounding him.

“Hi, Liam,” Dr. Olive said softly, keeping her tone light and open. “We’re going to play a few games today, okay? I’m going to ask you some questions, and you can answer in whatever way feels comfortable.”

Liam didn’t respond, his gaze still fixed on a spot on the wall. She smiled patiently, used to this type of beginning, and reached over to her desk, pulling out a small set of colored blocks.

“Let’s start with something fun. Can you tell me which block is red?”

Liam’s eyes flicked briefly to the blocks, then back to the wall, uninterested. Dr. Olive wasn’t deterred. She took her time, slowly turning the blocks over in her hands, talking softly about the colors, and their shapes. Gradually, his attention shifted, and he looked down at the objects in front of him.

“That’s it,” she said, her tone encouraging. “Just take your time.”

Liam reached out and tapped the red block lightly, then quickly withdrew his hand, his fingers returning to Mattie’s fur. Dr. Olive observed the small victory, her mind racing with all the thoughts she wanted to piece together, but for now, she kept things moving.

They went through a few more basic questions—colors, shapes, a simple pattern game. Liam responded sporadically, his focus shifting between the task and something else in the room that Dr. Olive couldn’t see.

At one point, during a particularly quiet moment, she noticed a sudden shift in Liam’s body language. His attention snapped away from the task, his posture becoming rigid. His gaze seemed to fix on something unseen, just over her shoulder. Dr. Olive paused, setting down the small puzzle she had been working with.

Liam’s eyes widened slightly, his fingers tightening around Mattie. He wasn’t looking at her—he was looking beyond her as if there was someone else in the room. For a moment, Dr. Olive felt a strange chill, though she knew it wasn’t something to fear. It was something she had seen in other children on the spectrum, but it had never manifested quite like this before.

“Liam?” she called gently, but he didn’t respond.

His eyes remained locked on whatever had captured his attention. Then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, he nodded—just once. His lips moved slightly, forming what seemed to be the shape of a word, but no sound came out. Another nod followed as if he were listening, agreeing with something.

Dr. Olive watched carefully, not wanting to disturb the moment, but also trying to make mental note of every detail she was witnessing. Liam seemed engaged in a conversation, a silent exchange with someone—something—that wasn’t there.

Then, as quickly as it had started, it ended. Liam’s posture relaxed, and his gaze drifted back down to the floor. He settled back into his seat as if nothing had happened. His fingers resumed stroking Mattie’s fur, his expression once again neutral.

Dr. Olive didn’t react outwardly, but her mind raced with questions. She had seen children engage with imaginary friends before, but this… this felt different. It wasn’t the usual playful interaction of a child conjuring up a pretend friend to pass the time. This felt like Liam was actually experiencing the moment. His response felt as if he actually was seeing something.

She decided not to address it directly, at least not yet. She continued the session, observing carefully, but Liam’s attention remained with her, completing the rest of the exercises without further distraction.

Once the session ended, Dr. Olive quietly gathered her notes and stood. “I’ll be back in just a moment, Liam,” she said softly, giving him a reassuring smile before stepping out of the room.

In the family room, Sara sat anxiously beside James and May. Liam’s exam had felt like a lifetime to her, and she could feel the weight of each second as it dragged on. She kept twisting her fingers together, her mind racing with questions about what Dr. Olive might find, what she might say.

When the door opened and Dr. Olive stepped out, Sara jumped to her feet. James stood more calmly, but even he couldn’t hide the tension on his face.

“Come on in,” Dr. Olive said, her voice welcoming but thoughtful. “Let’s talk about Liam.”

Sara followed quickly behind James, with May close on their heels. They settled into the chairs opposite the doctor’s desk, exchanging worried glances as they prepared for what they might hear.

Dr. Olive smiled warmly, glancing down at her notes. “Well, first of all, let me start by saying that Liam is bright, creative, and very responsive, as far as the spectrum goes. He’s doing incredibly well in terms of his engagement with tasks and his ability to understand what’s going on around him.”

Sara felt a small, cautious flicker of hope. Bright. Creative. Responsive. These were words she had longed to hear. James shifted slightly in his chair, listening intently, his eyes flicking between Dr. Olive and Sara.

“He’s very thoughtful with his actions,” Dr. Olive continued, “and though he doesn’t speak in the traditional sense, I see a lot of potential there. His responses, while non-verbal, are very intentional. You’ve done an excellent job helping him navigate the world.”

Sara nodded, swallowing hard. “Thank you,” she said softly. “But…what about the sounds he’s been making? His attempts to speak?”

Dr. Olive paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts. She leaned forward slightly, her voice gentle but focused. “I’ve noticed something interesting today, something I’d like to hear your thoughts on.”

Sara’s heart skipped a beat. She felt May stiffen beside her as if preparing for some revelation. James stayed quiet, his eyes locked on Dr. Olive’s face.

“Has Liam been demonstrating communication with an imaginary friend?” Dr. Olive asked, her eyes searching Sara’s for confirmation.

Sara froze. She felt the breath leave her body as the room seemed to stand still. Her mind immediately flashed back to the blocks. GOD, they had spelled. The strange moments when Liam seemed to be listening to someone she couldn’t see.

“How did you know?” Sara asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Dr. Olive leaned back slightly in her chair, her expression thoughtful. “It’s not uncommon for children, especially those on the spectrum, to develop relationships with imaginary friends,” she said carefully. “But in Liam’s case…well, he seems particularly attuned to something that is guiding his attention in ways that are quite unique. He’s very responsive to it.”

“I think it’s God,” May said quickly, trying to get it out before Sara could object.

“May!” Sara exclaimed. “What she means Dr. Olive is that Liam has evidently named his friend God.” He has spelled out the name using his toys recently.”

Dr. Olive tilted her head, observing their reactions. “Very interesting”, she said giving a brief pause. “ I don’t think there is much need for concern.” she added gently. “In fact, this type of engagement could be a positive sign—a way for Liam to express himself or make sense of the world around him. I’d like to explore it a little further”, she said giving a brief pause.

“The level of focus and intent I saw during this encounter was definitely something worth exploring.”

Sara swallowed hard, her mind racing. Was it part of why he’d started making sounds, trying to speak? Or was it something else entirely?

The uncertainty hung in the air, thick and heavy. Dr. Olive glanced down at her notes again, her tone shifting back to professional.

“For now, I suggest we continue to encourage Liam’s growth. He’s bright, creative, and clearly responding to the world around him.

Whatever this is it’s part of how he’s making sense of things. We’ll keep monitoring it.”

There was no resolution. No clear answer. And somehow, that felt even heavier to Sara. She wanted to ask more, to dig deeper, but part of her wasn’t ready for what she might find.

As Dr. Olive wrapped up her notes, she offered a warm, reassuring smile. “We’ll continue working together to help Liam. He’s got a lot of potential, and I think we’re just beginning to see what he’s capable of.”

Sara nodded slowly, her mind still clouded with questions. They all stood to leave, Liam still clutching Mattie tightly by the door. The uncertainty about his "friend" lingered, but for now, all they could do was wait and watch—hoping that whatever he was experiencing would lead them toward answers in time.

Chapter 6

What’s his name?

As they exited the building Sara says, “I feel good about Dr. Olive. Like we are finally in the right place.” May agreed. “Did you see all those degrees and awards on that wall? She’s got to be pretty smart. “

“Well, if we are done here I got to be getting back to work”, James interrupted. “I‘ll bring home some dinner if you’d like, I know you have had a stressful day”, he said as he gave Sara a quick hug. “That would be nice James, thank you, ”Sara replied. With that James started down the sidewalk, giving Liam a quick goodbye,” I’ll see ya later there big guy.”

“That’s a good man you got there Sara. Now, I know he ain’t perfect, but lord knows we have all got some improvements we could use,” May said turning her attention to Sara.

“I know, May. I know I can be too hard on him sometimes. He is a good man”, said Sara.

“Seems like he’s harder on himself than you could be,” May added. “When’s the last time y’all had a vacation? You know, a romantic vacation?”

May whispered as if she we speaking of something taboo. “As nice as that sounds , I’d never be able to convince him to take off work and get away, besides, the holidays are right around the corner. Who’s got time for a vacation? “Sara said shutting down May’s idea.

“Well, it took me two husbands to figure it out, but if you don’t make time for that man, some other woman will be glad to.” May said in a matter-of-fact tone. “May you’ve have been married three times?” Sara said jokingly lightening the conversation. “Well, the first one, your grandpa, don’t count. He didn’t stray. He just had a heart attack. God rest his soul”, May replied. “It was the other two jerks I was talking about. And I’m just saying, men have a tendency to make bad decisions by themselves, and it makes them easy to seduce by these harlots running around.”

Sara raised her eyebrow and laughed, ”What?.. What are you talking about? I think you may need to lay off the Harlequin romance books for a while old woman. James is not getting seduced away by some Jesabell and her worldly ways, the man just works too much.”

“Well, I didn’t think so with Paul or .. what’s his name either. I’m just saying it can happen”, May said with a half-smile. “What’s his name?” Sara chuckled. “That must have been true love.”

“Well.. it seemed like it at the time”, May said with a grin.

“Well let’s talk holidays! I can’t wait! “ May said excitedly.

“I know”, Said Sara. “I’d really like to have Christmas at our house this year, you remember I got that big tree on sale after Christmas last year, and I can’t wait to see it up for the first time.”

“I can do all the cooking, I just got my new set of stainless pots and pans I’ve been saving up for !”, May exclaimed.

“Now May, we don’t need to over- do it with the food, it’s just going be the four of us”, Sara said trying to calm May’s excitement. “That is unless you got a husband number four in the works I don’t know about”, Sara added with a devilish grin. “Ha!, I think there’s a better chance of me bringing Elvis, or who’s that real handsome… Ricky Martin. ”, May chuckled. “Wait.. I think he's Gay “, Sara chimed in. “Really? Well still probably a better pick than my last two”, May said with burst of laughter.

“ Oh yeah , I wanted to ask, isn’t your church doing one of those trunk-or-treat things this year for Halloween?” Sara said changing the subject. “I was reading something about it the other day."

"What? “, May said almost dumbfoundedly. “You want to go to my church?” This was an idea May had been praying about for so long she wasn’t sure what to say.

“No, May …well kind of. At least to the parking lot. I was reading about these trunk-or-treat places, and how they are usually smaller scale, less stimulation alternatives for children with autism. I’m hesitant to even try again, but he does love it so much.. until it seems to get overwhelming. Maybe this could be a less stressful way for him to experience Halloween.” Sara said as she looked over at Liam to see him sitting at the picnic table wrapping Mattie in bandages the doctor had given him to play with. “Oh, I think that is a wonderful idea, Sara” ,May said trying to reserve a little of the enthusiasm she was feeling about Sara’s suggestion. It had been such a long time since Sara had shown any willingness to even consider such a thing. “Just wonderful!”

**Chapter 7: A Quiet Victory**

The day unfolded with an unusual ease, a stark contrast to the heaviness that had settled over the household in recent weeks. The morning sun filtered through the blinds, casting a warm glow across the living room where Liam sat, stacking his wooden blocks with precise, careful movements. His usual rigidity seemed softened today, as if he were moving through the world with a little less weight on his small shoulders.

Sara watched from the kitchen, sipping her coffee, hesitant to disrupt the peace. These moments were rare—too rare. It had been weeks since she’d seen Liam this calm, this present. Normally, she wouldn’t dare change anything about a morning that was going well, but today felt different. Maybe it was a good day to push boundaries—just a little.

“Hey, buddy,” she said gently, setting down her mug. “Want to go to the park?”

Liam’s hands stilled over the blocks. He blinked once, then turned toward her, his fingers brushing the ear of Mattie. It wasn’t an outright no, which was already more than she expected.

She knelt beside him. “Just for a little bit. We don’t have to stay long.”

Liam’s eyes flickered to the window, where the leaves swayed lazily in the breeze. He tapped his fingers against Mattie’s arm—a gesture she had learned to read as deep thought. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he gave the smallest nod.

Sara nearly sighed in relief. “Okay, then. Let’s get your shoes.”

The park was mostly empty, save for a few joggers and an older couple walking their dog. The stillness suited Liam, who preferred spaces that weren’t crowded, weren’t filled with too much unpredictability. He stood at the edge of the playground, gripping Mattie with one hand while his other hovered near Sara’s. Not quite holding it, but not pulling away either.

Sara let him take his time. He always did things in his own way, on his own terms. She sat on a bench nearby, watching as he stepped cautiously onto the play structure, his movements deliberate. He traced his fingers over the textured plastic of the slide but didn’t climb it. He walked the perimeter of the swings but didn’t sit. Instead, he found his way to the wooden bridge connecting two platforms and paused there, gripping the railing.

The breeze caught his hair as he looked out, his lips parting slightly. Sara’s heart clenched as she watched. It wasn’t unusual for Liam to stand still like this, but there was something about the way he held himself that made her hesitate.

After a few moments, she rose and walked over. “Liam?” she asked softly.

He turned his head slightly, his gaze shifting to her, but he didn’t move away. Then, before she could say anything else, something remarkable happened.

He reached for her hand.

It was small, fleeting. His fingers barely brushed against hers before he clasped them around the bridge’s railing again. But Sara felt it—felt the warmth of his tiny hand, the deliberate nature of the motion. It wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t just for balance.

He had reached for her.

Tears stung her eyes, but she didn’t let them fall. She just stayed there, standing beside him, resting her hand on the railing next to his.

“Pretty nice day, huh?” she murmured.

Liam nodded.

**Chapter 8: Trunk-or-Treat**

The morning sun barely crested the horizon, but Sara was already awake, her mind spinning with preparations. Halloween had never been easy with Liam, and tonight would be no different. She sifted through the small pile of costume pieces she had carefully chosen, hoping this year he could enjoy the holiday without becoming overwhelmed.

As she poured her coffee, she wedged the phone between her ear and shoulder, flipping through the mail. Across the kitchen, Liam sat at the table, his tongue peeking out in concentration as he carefully dragged a crayon across the paper.

"Yeah, I don’t know," Sara said, shifting the phone to her other ear. "I guess he’s in some kind of colorful phase or something. Everyone’s got blue hair, green lipstick—" she glanced at the picture, smirking, "—and apparently, bright orange hair is a thing now too."

May’s voice crackled through the line. "Well, honey, maybe he just sees the world brighter than we do."

"Or," Sara said, picking up a crayon Liam had discarded, "he just thinks he’s got to use every crayon in the box on each picture."

Liam didn’t look up, too absorbed in his drawing. He carefully shaded the hair of two stick figures standing in the middle of wavy blue streaks.

Sara’s gaze drifted to the background, where a brown shape stretched across the top of the page. She tilted her head. "Are you drawing a bridge, buddy?"

Liam paused for just a second. Then he nodded.

Sara smiled and ruffled his hair. "Looks good, kiddo. We’ll put this one on the fridge." She glanced at her watch, then sighed. "Oh, May—I better get off here, or we’ll never make it on time tonight. See you in a little while."

**Chapter 9: The Shadows Beyond**

Rows of decorated cars lined the paved lot outside the church, each trunk transformed into a tiny world—some spooky, some silly. The glow of string lights flickered against the early evening sky as Sara pulled into a parking spot.

"Look, Liam," she said softly, pointing toward May, who was dressed as a cat, her tail swishing as she waved. "There’s Grandma."

Liam’s eyes followed her finger. He clutched Mattie a little tighter but didn’t shrink back. That was a good sign.

So far, things were going as well as Sara had hoped. Liam stuck close to her, watching the other children with a mix of curiosity and hesitation. But he wasn’t upset. The smaller scale of the event, the calmness of the church setting—it helped.

As the crowd thinned and the evening wound down, Sara found herself drawn into conversation with some of the other parents. Distracted, she didn’t immediately notice Liam moving away.

At first, she assumed he was just wandering. But something about his movement made her stop.

This wasn’t his usual, deliberate, measured way of walking—where every step was calculated, careful, as if navigating an invisible maze.

This was different.

His movements were looser, more natural. And his focus wasn’t on his feet, but on something unseen ahead.

Sara’s polite nods to the parents faded. Her full attention locked onto Liam.

He was walking toward the far edge of the church courtyard, where the glow of the event lights met the encroaching dark. He stopped at the threshold between them, his head slightly tilted. His lips parted, but no sound came out.

Sara’s stomach twisted.

She had seen moments like this before—those fleeting instances when Liam seemed to engage with something beyond her understanding. But tonight, it lasted longer.

His expression wasn’t fearful. It was… attentive.

He was listening.

Her fingers tightened around the strap of her purse as she took in every detail—the way his shoulders remained relaxed, how he wasn’t anxious, wasn’t unsettled, but entirely still.

And then, just as suddenly, it was over.

Liam blinked, gave the faintest smile, and turned back toward the decorated trunks without hesitation—without distress.

Sara swallowed hard, a chill creeping up her spine.

This time, she couldn’t brush it off.

Something was happening.

As she stood there, whirling in thought, she caught movement from across the parking lot. Her stomach dropped as she realized May was signaling to someone.

Her blood ran cold when she saw who it was.

The preacher.

Sara’s jaw clenched as he approached, his warm smile far too knowing.

"So glad you could join us tonight, Sara," he greeted, his tone kind but pointed. "It’s been a long time. You know, we’ll be looking for you at 10 a.m. sharp this Sunday."

Sara felt the walls close in.

She forced a polite smile, but her voice was tight. "Thank you, but we’re just here for the Trunk-or-Treat."

The preacher pressed on, speaking of community, forgiveness, and finding strength in faith.

Sara barely heard him. Her gaze shifted to May, who was watching her with that hopeful look—the one Sara now realized had been part of the plan all along.

This was a setup.

Her blood ran hot.

"May," Sara said tightly. "Could I speak to you for a moment?"

She pulled her grandmother a few feet away, her voice barely restrained. "I can’t believe you’d do this. I trusted you."

May’s smile faltered. "Sara, I just want what’s best for you and Liam. You can’t keep running from this forever."

"Running?" Sara’s voice sharpened. "I’m not the one hiding behind faith and church. You had no right to put me in this position, especially tonight."

May’s eyes softened, but she stood firm. "Is it me you’re angry with, Sara, or is it God?"

Sara stiffened. The words hit like a slap. She tried to fire back, but what came out was quieter, rawer.

"Both, May. Honestly, both."

Silence.

Sara’s fists clenched. Finally, she whispered, "Because He took her. He took my mother. I was just a child. I needed her, and He took her away."

May’s voice was gentle, carrying the weight of years. "Sara, that’s not how God works."

Sara’s voice wavered, anger bleeding into sorrow. "And He didn’t do anything to stop it, did He? And on top of that, the locket…"

May frowned. "What?"

Sara swallowed hard. "Mom’s locket. I took it from her dresser that night… the last night. It was all I had left of her."

Her voice broke.

"And a few days later, the clasp broke, and it slipped off. By the time I noticed… it was gone. I begged God, in every way I could think of, to let me find it, to give me some sign that He cared. But nothing. It felt like losing her all over again."

May reached out, but Sara stepped back.

"Please, just let this be. I don’t need this tonight."

May’s expression was full of sadness, but she nodded. "Alright, Sara. But remember, I’m here when you’re ready."

Sara turned, gathering Liam. As she buckled him in, she glanced once more at May.

"Whatever is going on with my son and this family is freaking me out. Please stop making it harder."

She climbed into the driver’s seat, her hands shaking as she pulled away, leaving May standing alone in the church parking lot.

**Chapter 10: Small Moments, Big Meanings**

The morning started the way most did—quiet, steady, predictable. Sara moved through her usual motions, pouring coffee, packing Liam’s lunch, scanning emails. But something about the air felt different today, less tense than usual. Maybe it was just exhaustion settling into acceptance, or maybe it was the way Liam had seemed unusually at ease since the Trunk-or-Treat event.

She glanced at him now, sitting at the kitchen table, his small fingers tracing the rim of his juice glass while Mattie sat beside him, propped up like a silent guardian. His movements were calm, unhurried, his usual anxious twitches less frequent.

“Hey, buddy,” she said, setting down a plate of toast. “What do you think about going to Grandma May’s a little early today? She said something about baking cookies.”

Liam didn’t look up right away. He pressed his palm against Mattie’s soft fur, then gave the faintest nod. It wasn’t excitement, but it wasn’t rejection either.

Sara took that as a win.

May greeted them at the door, flour already dusting the front of her apron. “Well, there’s my two favorite people. Come on in—I’ve got a batch of dough ready for little hands.”

Liam hesitated at the threshold, then stepped inside, keeping close to Sara as they moved toward the kitchen. May had set out bowls of colored sprinkles, cookie cutters, and a rolling pin dusted in flour. She patted the chair next to her, encouraging Liam to sit.

He eyed the setup warily but, after a pause, climbed onto the chair. He didn’t reach for anything, just observed. Watching, always watching.

May smiled knowingly. “No rush, sweetheart. Just do what feels right.”

Sara sat across from them, watching as May rolled out the dough, humming under her breath. There was something comforting about the whole scene, something normal. A rare gift these days.

As May worked, she glanced up. “You know, your mama used to love baking when she was a little girl.”

Sara tensed slightly but didn’t interrupt.

“She’d always try to sneak extra sugar into the dough when she thought I wasn’t looking.” May chuckled. “And she’d press her fingerprints into every cookie like she was marking them as hers.”

Liam reached out, hesitantly touching the edge of the rolling pin with one finger.

May noticed but kept her attention on the dough. “She believed everything had meaning. Every little thing, no matter how small.”

Sara exhaled. “That’s because she had faith, May. That was always her answer for everything.”

May pressed a cookie cutter into the dough. “And maybe she wasn’t wrong.”

Sara rubbed her temples. “Not everything has to mean something.”

May simply smiled. “Maybe. But some things do.”

They worked in quiet for a few minutes, Liam still watching more than participating. But then, slowly, his fingers reached for a tiny star-shaped cookie cutter. He pressed it carefully into the dough, lifting it with precision before placing it on the baking sheet.

May beamed. “There you go, sweetheart. That’s a fine-looking star.”

Sara swallowed against the unexpected lump in her throat. It was just a cookie. Just a small movement.

But some things did have meaning, whether she was ready to admit it or not.

That evening, after dinner, Sara sat on the couch, flipping absently through a magazine while Liam rested against her side, Mattie tucked beneath his arm. His breathing was slow, steady.

“Did you have a good day?” she asked softly.

Liam didn’t answer right away. Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, he said, “Cookies.”

Sara stilled.

It wasn’t the first time he’d spoken, not really, but it was rare. So rare that every word felt like a gift she wasn’t sure how to accept.

She smiled, smoothing a hand over his hair. “Yeah, buddy. Cookies.”

Liam curled into her a little more, his small body warm against hers. And for the first time in a long time, the weight in Sara’s chest didn’t feel quite as heavy.

**Chapter 11:**

**Liam’s World**

The progress Liam had been making in therapy was slow but steady. Dr. Olive had introduced new methods, using play and sensory activities to help him communicate. But it was at home where Sara noticed the most significant changes.

One evening, as they sat at the kitchen table, Liam carefully aligned a row of toy cars in perfect order. Sara sat beside him, her chin resting on her hand as she watched his small hands move with precision. The rhythmic motion was soothing, a moment of calm in the midst of the chaos that had taken over their lives.

But then Liam stopped. His whole body stiffened, his hands frozen mid-motion. Slowly, he turned his head toward the doorway, his eyes wide and unblinking. He clutched Mattie tightly, holding the bear to his chest like a shield.

“Liam?” Sara said, her voice low and steady, trying not to alarm him. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

Liam’s gaze flicked to her, then back to the doorway. His shoulders curled inward, his breathing shallow and fast. Finally, in a voice barely above a whisper, he said, “Mattie says…not safe.”

Sara felt her stomach drop. “Not safe? What’s not safe, Liam?”

But Liam didn’t answer. Instead, he pushed his chair back and darted to the living room, curling up on the couch with Mattie in his arms. His rocking started immediately—slow, deliberate, and rhythmic. Sara stayed frozen for a moment, her heart racing. She’d seen Liam retreat into himself before, but this was different. He looked…scared.

She followed him into the living room, kneeling beside the couch. “Liam,” she said softly, brushing his hair back. “It’s okay. You’re safe here, I promise.” But her words felt hollow, even to her. She didn’t understand what had frightened him, and that made it all the harder to comfort him.

“Mattie says…not safe.” Liam repeated, his voice trembling.

“Liam, your dad and I would never let anything hurt you or Mattie.” she said in a soothing voice as she curled up on the couch holding him tight to her. “Try to get some sleep honey I’m right here. There’s nothing to be afraid of.” She said trying to sound convincing although she felt anything but sure of that.

It was early when Sara woke up. Still curled up with Liam on the couch. Still in the same clothes from the night before. After the stressful night they’d had, Sara felt a little sigh of relief when she remembered she had taken the day off work to take Liam to his appointment.

James entered the room, his tie slightly askew as he grabbed his coffee. “You ready to head out?” he asked, glancing at Sara.

She hesitated. “I’m not sure if we should go today.”

James frowned. “Why not?”

Sara glanced at Liam, lowering her voice. “He keeps saying something about not being safe. It’s probably nothing, but…”

James sighed, setting his mug down. “Sara, we can’t rearrange everything based on a feeling. I know it’s hard, but he doesn’t mean anything by it.”

Sara wanted to argue, but the words caught in her throat. Maybe James was right. Maybe she was overthinking it.

Just as Sara was about to grab her keys, the phone rang. She answered it, expecting Dr. Olive’s office, but instead, it was a neighbor. The voice on the other end was frantic.

“Sara, thank God you are still home! Did you hear about the Bridge?”

“No, why? What happened?”

“It collapsed. Just around 7:20. The news says there were dozens of cars on it when it fell.”

The phone slipped from her hand. Her stomach lurched.  
“James.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “The bridge collapsed.”  
James stopped moving. Stopped breathing.  
They would have been on it.

“What?” James stepped closer, his brow furrowed. “The Eastland Bridge?”

Sara nodded, her chest tightening as the reality sank in. “If we’d left on time, we would’ve been on it.”

Sara for years had been pacing her commute by the bridge. That’s where traffic always began to bottleneck, so she always knew to get to the bridge by 7:15 to make it to work on time.

James stood frozen, his face pale as though he’d seen a ghost. “Sara…we would’ve been on that bridge.”

Sara slumped into a chair, her hands trembling. “How…how could he have known?” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

James sat across from her, his head in his hands. “I don’t know. I don’t understand any of this.”

May stepped into the kitchen, her face calm but resolute. “You don’t have to understand it,” she said softly. “Sometimes faith isn’t about understanding. It’s about trusting that there’s more to this world than we can see.”

Sara stared at her, her heart pounding. “But what if I’m not ready to trust?”

May reached out, placing a gentle hand over Sara’s. “You don’t have to be ready, honey. You just have to be willing.”

Liam appeared in the doorway, clutching Mattie tightly. His wide eyes met Sara’s for just a moment before he whispered, “Mattie says…it’s okay now.”

Sara felt tears spill down her cheeks as she pulled Liam into her arms, holding him tightly. “Thank you,” she whispered, though she wasn’t sure if she was speaking to her son, the bear, or something far greater.

**Chapter 12: Father Knows Best**

The tension in the Harper household simmered just below the surface, like an ember threatening to catch fire. James had been quieter than usual since the bridge collapse, withdrawing into himself despite Sara’s attempts to reach him. He left early, came home late, and buried himself in work—or at least, that’s what he claimed.

One evening, after another sharp exchange about his long hours, James escaped to the attic. He needed space to think, to breathe. Sara’s words echoed in his mind, cutting deeper than he wanted to admit. “You’re not present, James. You’re here, but you’re not really here.” The truth of it stung.

The attic smelled of dust and old memories. As he climbed the creaky stairs, he heard a faint shuffling sound. Pushing the door open, he found Liam sitting on an old box, Mattie cradled in his arms. Liam’s head was tilted slightly, his gaze locked just above James’s shoulder, as if he were listening to something unseen.

“Liam,” James said, sharper than he intended. “What are you doing up here? These aren’t your toys.”

Liam didn’t move, his eyes never wavering from that invisible point. James felt an unfamiliar chill creep up his spine.

“Liam,” he snapped, stepping forward. “You’re too old for this. You need to start growing up.”

He reached out, lifting Liam off the box and setting him firmly on the floor. The abrupt movement startled Liam, his body stiffening as he clutched Mattie tighter. Without a word, he bolted down the stairs, his footsteps echoing through the house.

James swallowed hard. He hadn’t meant to snap, but something about it—the way Liam stared past him, like he saw something James couldn’t—made his skin crawl.

Hours passed, and Liam still hadn’t come out of his room. Sara grew worried, and when James finally confessed what had happened, her face hardened.

“James, how could you?” she demanded, her voice low but edged. “You know how sensitive he is. You can’t just—”

“I know!” James interrupted, running a hand through his hair. “I know I messed up, okay? I just... I don’t know how to handle it sometimes.”

Sara’s anger softened into something else—concern. “What’s really going on, James? This isn’t just about Liam, is it?”

Before he could answer, May’s voice called out from down the hall. “Found him!”

They rushed to Liam’s room. He was curled up in the back of his closet, fast asleep. May knelt beside him, brushing his hair gently. “Poor thing must’ve cried himself to sleep,” she murmured.

James knelt too, his hands trembling as he reached for Liam’s shoulder. “Buddy,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to yell. I’m just... not very good at this. But I’m trying. Can you forgive me?”

Liam’s eyes slowly fluttered open. For a long moment, he simply stared at James—then past him. His head tilted slightly, as if listening.

James felt the same eerie sensation from the attic wash over him again.

Then, with a noticeable shift, Liam dropped his gaze back to James, his small hands fumbling in his pocket. Slowly, he pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to his father without a word.

James unfolded it, his breath catching as he recognized the image—a photograph of himself and his older brother as children, smiling at the camera.

His chest tightened. Where did Liam get this?

James sank onto the floor, his breathing uneven as old memories clawed their way to the surface.

“It was my fault,” he whispered, his voice barely audible. “I let him drown.”

Tears blurred his vision as he stared at the photo, his father’s cruel words from that day returning like a ghost. “What kind of man are you going to be? You’re always going to be weak. Not a real man.”

James had carried that guilt ever since, a weight he could never put down. It had shaped him, pushed him to be stronger, more reliable. But no matter how hard he tried, that voice—his father’s voice—was always there, whispering that he wasn’t enough.

Tears streamed down his face as he clutched the photo to his chest. “I’m so sorry,” he choked out, though he wasn’t sure if he was speaking to Liam, his brother, or himself.

Sara and May stood in the doorway, their own eyes glistening with tears as James finally let himself feel the weight of his past.

For the first time, Sara saw the man she had fallen in love with—not the weary, overworked version of him, but the human one beneath it all.

Chapter 11: That’s Your Screenname?

The faint clinking of mugs filled the kitchen as Sara poured herself another cup of coffee. The house was unusually quiet—Liam was in his room, and James was already at work. Across from her, May sat at the dining table, her tablet balanced precariously on her lap. She squinted at the screen, tapping harder than necessary, muttering under her breath when it didn’t respond the way she wanted.

Sara smirked. “What’s got you so focused?”

May glanced up, looking a mix of sheepish and defiant. “Oh, just... chatting.”

“Chatting?” Sara raised an eyebrow. “With who?”

May hesitated just a beat too long, and that was all Sara needed. “Oh my God. Are you online dating?”

“It’s not dating,” May said, setting the tablet down with exaggerated care. “It’s a chat room for mature adults. Just friendly conversation.”

“Uh-huh.” Sara smirked. “Friendly conversation, sure. What’s your screenname? Grandma’sCookies? Wait, no—GrannyPanties.”

May barked a laugh, shaking her head. “Don’t be ridiculous, Sara. It’s... 64ShadesOfGray.”

Sara froze mid-sip, nearly choking on her coffee. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh my God, May!” Sara howled, doubling over. “You did not. Please tell me you didn’t.”

May crossed her arms, trying to maintain her dignity. “It’s clever! Better than half the ridiculous names I’ve seen. At least mine has wit.”

Sara wiped away tears of laughter, her chuckles finally subsiding. “You’re unbelievable. But hey, if it works... So? Met anyone interesting?”

May’s cheeks turned faintly pink. Sara’s eyes widened. “You have! You’ve met someone.”

“It’s nothing serious,” May said, brushing imaginary crumbs from the table. “Just a nice man named Walter. We’ve been chatting. He’s very polite.”

“Polite? May, you’re blushing.”

“I am not,” May protested, but the twinkle in her eyes betrayed her. “He’s a retired professor. Loves history and gardening. Reminds me of your grandfather, in some ways.”

Sara’s teasing grin softened. “Well, I’m happy for you, May. You deserve someone who makes you smile like that.”

May waved her hand, brushing off the sentiment—but her smile lingered.

That night, May’s words about love and effort stayed with Sara. As she lay in bed, scrolling through her phone, an ad caught her eye—an autumn getaway package for a cozy, mountainside bed-and-breakfast.

She nudged James, who was half-asleep. “What do you think about taking a weekend off around Thanksgiving? Just the two of us.”

James cracked one eye open. “What about Liam?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Sara said. “We need this.”

James sighed, rubbing his face. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Let’s do it.”

Sara smiled, warmth blooming in her chest. Maybe May was right—marriage did take work.

But it was worth it.

Chapter 13:

It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas

The first snow of the season drifted lazily from the sky, dusting the rooftops and lawns in a soft white blanket. Inside the Harper home, Sara was a flurry of activity. Strings of lights lay tangled on the living room floor, garlands were draped over the banister, and the faint sound of Bing Crosby crooning Christmas carols hummed from the old stereo in the corner.

Liam was intently focused on the lights, tracing up and down each strand making sure he accounted for each light.

“Lights!”, he said quickly and forcefully.

Sara stood there, her heart pounding. Every breath was intentional. “You want to help me put them up, sweetheart?”

Liam nodded, clutching Mattie in one hand while reaching for the lights with the other. Together, they worked to string the lights along the banister, Sara guiding Liam’s hands gently when he struggled with the knots. Sara was longing to hear just one more word.

“You’re doing great, honey,” she said, smiling as he focused intently on his task. Moments like these—quiet, simple, filled with connection, moments most people took for granted, were the moments Sara longed for.

By the time evening fell, the house was transformed. The towering tree in the corner sparkled with white lights, ornaments from years past carefully arranged among its branches. Liam’s handmade decorations, a mix of painted pinecones and popsicle stick stars proudly displayed alongside the other ornaments.

Sara stepped back, surveying their handy-work with a satisfied sigh. “Looks pretty great, don’t you think?”

Liam tilted his head, staring at the tree for a long moment before turning to Sara and giving her a small, approving nod. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to make her chest tighten with emotion.

Later that night, as Sara sipped cocoa on the couch, her phone buzzed with a call from May.

“Evening, Sara,” May’s cheerful voice crackled through the line. “How’s my favorite little family?”

“Exhausted from all the decorating,” Sara said with a chuckle. “Oh, and Liam said ‘lights!’”

“What do you mean, ‘Oh and Liam said Lights?” “Are you serious?” ”That’s incredible news!”, she exclaimed.

“Good boy,” May said warmly. “Speaking of family, what’s the plan for Christmas? I assume you’ll want me to come early and help with the cooking?”

“Actually,” Sara said, her tone turning mischievous, “I want to do it this year. The whole works—big dinner, music, decorations. And…” She hesitated, grinning. “I think you should invite Walter.”

May’s laughter bubbled over the line. “Oh, Sara, I don’t know about that. We’ve only been seeing each other a little while.”

“All the more reason,” Sara teased. “If he’s going to stick around, he might as well meet the family.”

There was a pause before May replied, her voice softer. “You know, I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

As the days passed, Sara threw herself into preparations. She planned the menu down to the last detail—roast turkey, glazed carrots, mashed potatoes, and a trio of pies. She even made sure to bake an extra batch of cookies for the neighbors, a small tradition she’d kept alive despite her busy life.

James surprised her one evening by arriving home early from work, his hands full of shopping bags. “What’s all this?” Sara asked as he deposited the bags on the counter.

“Christmas decorations,” he said, shrugging. “Figured we could use a few more.”

Sara beamed, stepping forward to kiss him on the cheek. “You’re getting into the spirit, huh?”

“Something like that,” James said, a faint smile tugging at his lips. For the first time in months, the weight that had been dragging him down seemed to lift, if only a little.

Chapter 14:

Christmas Miracle?

The morning air was crisp, the ground outside sparkling with frost as Sara bustled about the kitchen. The oven was filled with roasting turkey and bubbling casseroles, the counters crowded with pies and trays of cookies. Liam sat at the kitchen table, carefully arranging cookie sprinkles while Mattie stood guard at his side.

“Alright, Liam,” Sara said, wiping her hands on her apron. “Grandma May and Walter should be here soon. You’ll need to wait just a little longer before we open presents, okay?”

Liam glanced at the tree in the living room, his fingers twitching slightly. “Presents!” , he exclaimed.

Sara could see the effort it took for him to stay patient, and she smiled softly. “It’s just a little while longer I promise.”

By mid-morning, May and Walter arrived, their arms laden with gifts and covered dishes. Walter, dressed in a thick sweater and scarf, was every bit as reserved as May had described, but his warm handshake and easy smile won Sara over immediately.

“Thank you for having me,” Walter said, his voice tinged with the faintest Southern drawl. “Your home is lovely.”

“It’s chaos,” Sara replied with a laugh, “but we love it. Make yourself comfortable.”

As they settled into the living room Sara knew Liam’s patience was wearing thin. “Alright, Liam. Go ahead and pick one to open.”

Liam approached the tree with deliberate care, his eyes scanning the brightly wrapped packages. But then, just as he reached for one, he froze. His head tilted slightly, as if listening to something, and his gaze drifted across the room.

For a moment, he stood still, a small smile creeping across his face. Then he turned back to the tree, reaching behind it to retrieve a small, crumpled package tied with mismatched ribbons.

He brought it to Sara, his grin wide. “For me?” Sara asked, with playful exaggeration. It wasn’t unusual for Liam to present her with an old toy or an old rubber spatula from the kitchen as a gift. She had learned just to indulge him and play along. Liam nodded, his excitement palpable.

She placed the gift in her lap and said, “I’m too excited, I will open this in a few minutes” and with that , the attention in the room immediately shifted back to Liam rummaging through the gifts. As Sara watched Liam open one toy after another, she noticed that he kept looking at the gift he’d given her. She began to sense his disappointment that she hadn’t opened it.

She decided to appease him by just calmly opening the gift and saying thanks without drawing all the attention in the room for an old toy or whatever. She began taking the knotted ribbon off the gift and removed the box from it’s wrapping. As she glanced up she noticed Liam’s attention had shifted from the toys to her. “I’m opening it!”, she said. “I like to take my time and enjoy it.

”Liam gave a quirky look as if to say “that’s weird”, and went back to his toys.

As Sara lifted the top off the box it was as if someone had instantly removed all of the oxygen from the room. Sara’s breath caught mid gasp as she realized what she was holding. “May,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

May leaned closer, her eyes widening “Oh, Sara,” she managed to get out, tears filling her eyes. “Is that…Catherines?”

The room fell silent as Sara stared at the locket, her mind racing. “How?” she whispered. “Where did this come from?”

She turned to Liam, but he was already focused on another gift, his expression calm. May placed a hand on Sara’s arm, her voice trembling with emotion. “It’s a miracle, Sara. Can’t you see? Gods reaching out to you.”

Sara clutched the locket tightly, her thoughts were an uncontrollable whirlwind. Part of her heart almost wanted to believe that, to accept this as a divine sign. But another part of her—a part rooted in years of doubt and pain couldn’t accept that as a response. It made no sense. She had lost the locket nearly twenty years ago. How did it get here, now?

“Maybe he just found it somewhere, you said you lost it.”, James said trying to be a voice of reason.

“James, I lost it over 20 years ago, Liam has never been inside that old house. This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Liam, honey, where’d you get this?”, she asked .her voice still shaking.

Liam barely gave notice to her words as he smiled and said,”presents.”

If there was ever a time Sara needed for Liam to communicate it was now. Her mind racing, trying to come up with one explanation for what had just happened. Her world had become defined by routine and reason. Every movement was part of a rhythm. How could this be possible.

Chapter 15

Sara’s Journey

The house was quiet, the warm glow of the Christmas tree casting long shadows across the walls. Sara sat curled up on the couch, the locket dangling from her fingers as she turned it over and over, studying the delicate engraving. The rest of the family had gone to bed, the day’s festivities leaving behind a peaceful stillness. But Sara’s mind was anything but peaceful.

She couldn’t shake the moment when Liam had stopped by the tree, his head tilting as if he’d heard something no one else could. The way he had smiled, the certainty with which he’d retrieved the small package—it all felt surreal. And now, holding the locket, the same one she’d lost so many years ago, Sara felt a deep, gnawing confusion.

She thought back to when she was eight, to the night she had taken the locket from her mother’s dresser. It had been her way of keeping a piece of her mom close, a child’s desperate attempt to hold onto something tangible in the face of loss. But when the clasp had broken, and the locket had disappeared, it had felt like losing her all over again.

She let out a shaky breath, her eyes burning with unshed tears. “How?” she whispered to the empty room. “How is this possible?”

The logical part of her mind tried to find an explanation. Maybe Liam had found it in an old box of keepsakes, something she’d missed over the years. But no—she’d searched for that locket endlessly after it disappeared. It had never turned up. Until now.

Her thoughts turned to Liam, to the way he seemed to exist in a world just beyond her reach. Had he felt something she couldn’t? Had someone—or something—guided him? She shook her head, frustration bubbling up inside her. She didn’t believe in miracles. Not anymore. And yet, here it was. A miracle she could hold in her hands.

Sara sat at the kitchen table, both hands wrapped around her coffee cup, though she wasn’t drinking it. The locket sat just beside her fingers, the chain curled in on itself like it had been waiting to be found.

May sat across from her, her own coffee steaming, her hands resting easily around the mug. Unlike Sara, she wasn’t drowning in thought—just waiting. Watching. Letting Sara sort through the tangle of thoughts that had unraveled everything she thought she knew.

“So what now Sara? You just planning on staying awake forever?” “You are eventually going to have to sleep honey”, May said in her motherly tone.

“How?” Sara finally said, her voice quiet but sharp. “How does something disappear for twenty years and then just—just show up? In his hands?” May didn’t answer, at least not right away. She just let Sara talk, let her wrestle with it.

“And Liam,” Sara went on, running a hand through her hair. “How does he know about James’ brother? He wasn’t even alive when Michael drowned. “

“There has to be an explanation,” she muttered. “Something rational. Some missing piece.”

Sara lifted her gaze. “You knew James and Michael when they were kids, what do you remember about Michael? About when he died?”

May smiled a little at that, leaning back slightly in her chair. “Oh, those boys,” she said. “Michael and James—thick as thieves, those two. Lived right at the end of the street, inseparable. James was a few years younger, and Lord, he idolized his big brother. Would have followed him off a cliff if Michael told him to.”

Sara listened, fingers brushing against the locket absently, the weight of it still unfamiliar. May kept talking, the memory easing into her voice.

“It was just awful, when it happened. That poor family just fell apart.” She said as she let out a deep breath. “The boys had gone swimming just like every other day that summer. I remember it seemed hotter than usual that summer, it just seemed like the heat was never going to end”, May explained as she explored deeper into the memory. “Michael had swam out into the middle of the river and something caused him to struggle trying to swim back. They said maybe a muscle cramp because of the heat, or exhaustion. And poor James, he was so small there was nothing he could do but just watch. He had to watch his big brother, his idol, just disappear into the water. “ “Bless his heart.”

Michael was like the pied piper of this town. The other kids just followed him around. Always the leader of the pack. If there was trouble, you could bet he was right in the middle of it. And the boy was wild. Always coming up with something. I couldn’t help but smile at the funeral thinking how it was a perfect tribute to him that half the kids in town showed up with bright orange hair.”

Sara blinked, her fingers pausing on the locket. “What?”

“Oh, it wasn’t real dye,” May said with a wave of her hand. “Just some hair product they found—Lord knows where. But Michael talked a whole pack of them into using it, swore it would make their hair sun-kissed like those surfer boys on TV. And, well.” She shook her head. “You couldn’t walk five feet without seeing some poor kid with streaky, blotchy, carrot-colored hair.”

Sara stared at her, the pieces shifting, unsettled, inside her mind. She swallowed. “James too?”

May laughed. “James looked like a pumpkin.” She took another sip of her coffee, her smile warm. “Michael, of course, thought it was the funniest thing in the world.”

Sara didn’t laugh. She barely breathed.

“May, where did Michael drown?, “ asked Sara, her stare still locked onto the locket in her hand.

“It was just up the river, over off Quarry road, May said,” Back then that was a real popular place for kids to hang-out.”

“Under the bridge?” “Eastland bridge?”

“Well, yeah that’s it”, May said hesitantly.

“What are you thinking Sara? What does the Eastland Bridge have to do with anything?”

But Sara didn’t respond. For a long, uncomfortable few moments it was if the whole world was in slow motion. May watched as Sara stood and turned toward the refrigerator. Sara felt herself torn between a panic to find something and desperately hoping there was nothing to find.

“Sara? What in the world are you looking for?” May asked.

Suddenly Sara stopped. She reached out and removed the paper from the refrigerator door.

“Orange hair!” she said in a voice so small it was clear she was trying to convince herself.

“What?” May asked. “I don’t understand.”

“ORANGE HAIR! Liam’s drawing! Two boys, orange hair, in front of a bridge!”,

Chapter 16: The Science of the Unseen

Sara sat across from Dr. Olive, the weight of uncertainty pressing against her chest. She traced the delicate curve of her mother’s locket between her fingers, its smooth surface warm against her skin. Ever since that Christmas morning when Liam had inexplicably retrieved it from behind the tree, questions had been swirling in her mind like a storm she couldn’t outrun.

After missing their last appointment, Sara had hesitated before calling to reschedule. She wasn’t sure why she had—maybe it was the overwhelming weight of everything that had happened, or maybe it was the bridge collapse, which had left both her and James speechless. The reality that they should have been on that bridge, that they had been spared by sheer happenstance—or something more—was impossible to ignore. She hadn’t told Dr. Olive about it yet, but now, sitting in her office, the words were at the edge of her lips.

Dr. Olive regarded her with calm attentiveness, hands folded neatly atop her desk. “You said you had something you wanted to talk about?”

Sara exhaled slowly. She had rehearsed this conversation in her head a hundred times, but now that she was here, she hesitated. She wasn’t even sure if she believed the words she was about to say.

“I know this might sound… ridiculous,” she began, forcing herself to meet the doctor’s gaze. “But have you ever seen cases where children on the spectrum seem to… perceive things the rest of us can’t?”

Dr. Olive didn’t react with skepticism. Instead, she leaned forward slightly, an intrigued expression crossing her face. “That’s a more common question than you might think.”

Sara blinked. “It is?”

The doctor nodded. “There’s a growing body of research exploring the possibility that some children with ASD have heightened perception—perhaps even an awareness that extends beyond what we understand. Some experience extreme sensory sensitivity. Others have exhibited an uncanny ability to anticipate events before they happen.”

Sara’s pulse quickened. “Like… a kind of intuition?”

Dr. Olive considered this. “Possibly. Some might call it intuition. Others might call it a unique way of processing the world. And then…” She hesitated. “Then there are the cases that science hasn’t been able to explain.”

A chill ran down Sara’s spine. “Like what?”

Dr. Olive turned her computer screen toward Sara, pulling up a research article. “There are documented cases of children who seem to ‘know’ things they were never taught. Some have reported detailed conversations with relatives who passed away before they were born. Others have predicted future events with eerie accuracy.”

Sara stiffened. “You believe that?”

“I believe that there’s a lot we don’t understand,” Dr. Olive replied, her voice measured. “Science is about exploring the unknown, not dismissing it.”

Sara’s fingers tightened around the locket. The room suddenly felt smaller, the air thicker. “Liam has a… friend,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “An invisible one. And he… he knew where to find this.” She held up the locket, her hands trembling. “I lost it twenty years ago.”

Dr. Olive’s brows lifted slightly, but she remained calm. “Did Liam ever see it before?”

“No. It disappeared when I was a child.” Sara swallowed. “He found it behind our Christmas tree. He looked… like he was listening to something. Someone.”

Dr. Olive leaned back in her chair, exhaling thoughtfully. “You’re not the first parent who’s come to me with a story like this.”

Sara’s breath hitched. “I’m not?”

The doctor shook her head. “There’s a research program currently studying children like Liam—kids who show an unusual connection to things beyond their immediate understanding. Some researchers theorize that their brains process stimuli on levels we don’t yet comprehend. Others speculate it could be something more.”

Sara frowned. “More?”

Dr. Olive gave a small, knowing smile. “What we often call ‘paranormal’ might just be science we haven’t figured out yet.”

A silence stretched between them. Sara had spent years running from faith, clinging to logic, trusting only what she could see and touch. And yet, here she was, facing the possibility that her son might be proof of something she couldn’t explain.

“What are you suggesting?” she finally asked.

“I’m suggesting we observe,” Dr. Olive said carefully. “Not to change Liam—just to understand him better. If you’re willing, I can refer you to the research team conducting these studies. They won’t pressure you into anything. But it might help shed light on what you’re experiencing.”

Sara exhaled, her mind spinning. Did she want answers? Or was she afraid of what those answers might be?