*Buffalo, New York*

***“Slow Dancing in a Burning Room”***

Gabriel Mackie had just celebrated his fourth birthday the first time he visited the whisper room, a windowless enclave with lavender walls brimming with daydreams, obscured from reality. All he knew for certain was that his older brother, Griff, nicknamed Boo, was gone. His bedroom at the end of the long hallway had been transformed into a guest room with ecru lace duvets instead of the blue and white pinstriped spreads covering the twin beds. Vanished were his toy box and New York Yankee American League pennants that had plastered the walls, replaced by paintings of water lilies and wheat fields. A stray tear trickled down Gabe’s cheek when he remembered Boo’s curly blonde hair and how he snorted when he laughed. Silence is deafening and the Mackie household screamed heartbreak.

Tree branches dipped in the wind tossing shadows across the windows heralding a tempest gathering force. Matt sipped his coffee and thumbed through last night’s restaurant receipts while Summer twirled a strand of hair around her finger. Gabe tiptoed to the kitchen doorway, jumping back when he heard his mother slam her fist on the counter. It’s Willa’s fault Griff is gone,” her voice stringent and tight. “Tickling him while he sucked on a gumball, for God’s sake. I trusted her to take care of him for fifteen minutes – fifteen damn minutes – while I picked up Gabe from a birthday party. He couldn’t find his shoes…I would have been home sooner and maybe… I love my daughter, but she knew to call 911 in an emergency, and she didn’t do it…why?”

Matt shook his head. “Summer come on . . . you’ve got to quit blaming her,” his voice raising an octave in frustration. “You’re as responsible as Willa.”

Summer turned her back to her husband shielding the wounds caused by his words. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m so sorry…please we don’t need to be playing this blame game….”

“I guess it’s too much to ask for you to understand what I’m going through Matt. What part of my daughter killing our son don’t you get?”

“Honey, you’re overreacting….”

They both turned as Gabe scampered into the room dragging a stuffed elephant by its trunk. “Mommy, did Willa find where Boo’s hiding? Quackers and me wanna’ play next…you count to ten and say ready-or-not, here I come…okay.”

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One heedless moment changed the Mackies forever as normalcy assumed a new persona for a family in crisis. Summer yielded to her debilitating grief and broken heart syndrome attending extensive counseling, struggling to coexist with what surely would be a lifetime of regret and guilt for her role in her child’s death. Tina, Matt’s college friend and partner in their restaurant, shouldered more of the day-to-day business operations while he concentrated on the needs of his preteen daughter, youngest son, and his wife, relegating his own suffering to the backburner, for now. Further complicating matters the A/H1N1 or the “swine flu” reached pandemic stages prompting Willa’s elementary school to shutter allowing their precocious ten-year-old to huddle non-stop with her best friends developing secret codes and unifying opinions of what they loved and hated from food to fashion to music and beyond. At night she played the *bed at* *nine o’clock is for babies…and I need some privacy…please* cards. Although she too was in therapy, her counselor reported a progression in her sketches softening her mom’s devil-image, depicting herself and Gabe romping through fields of shamrocks. Young Gabe spent most days in the sanctuary of his own thoughts, languidly building marshmallow forts with toothpicks, doodling stick figures on gum wrappers, erecting statues with purple-paradise and foam-green Play-Doh and knowing with certainty the humming inside a seashell was for his ears only.

Neighbors and friends of the couple offered additional support – arranging playdates with the Mackie children, supplying an unlimited assortment of homemade cookies, picking up laundry, and hosting sleepovers allowing Matt and Summer some privacy. In the beginning, the family experienced progressions of despair and disillusionment like a bitter wind lacerating an empty heart. As hours turned into days and days into months, scars concealed the wounds and the most tormenting pleas, why and how could a loving God be so merciless, were placated with soothing testimonies sermonizing how He is too kind to do anything cruel, too wise to make a mistake, and too philosophical to explain himself. Tears that uncontrollably sprung up from some secret reservoir were replaced with shards of hope, sweet reflections, and moments of tenderness rather than grief.

Summer and Matt rekindled the relationship that began when she and a group of male coworkers walked into his restaurant ten years ago. She appeared to have just stepped out of a refrigerated box while the others wilted in humidity and stifling heat. His future wife owned that “can’t-take-your-eyes-off-of” look of a femme fatale wrapped in the wholesomeness of a Jennifer Aniston…a dangerous combination. His heart rate rivaled a thoroughbred on his way to the finish line of the Kentucky Derby. His bachelorhood was skating on thin ice.

The Mackies resumed the habits and routines that dictated daily life, both parents returning to their jobs, Willa traversing the halls of middle school and Gabe keeping his first-grade teachers on their toes until one day when a road trip once more toppled their lives into disarray.

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***Saturday, August 4, 2012***

Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity is easier to grasp than a teenage girl. Reportedly a “typical” teen might exhibit all seven personalities associated with this age group, and Willa Mackie’s photograph would be on the top of the profile page. She changed gears faster than a race car driver, often a darling until spoken to, then spewing the venom of a dragon spitting out a fire in response. The mornings before school introduced the drama queen, as if the end of the world lurked nearby just because it was Monday and she wanted it to be Tuesday.

The family’s weekend outing was planned for departure around noon. While Matt and Gabe played tag football in the backyard, Summer, for the third time, climbed the stairs to Willa’s bedroom. She jiggled the doorknob. It was locked. Praying for the ability to bury a groundswell of impatience and the urge to take an ax to the door, Summer took a deep breath and knocked – the response from the other side, a razor-sharp, “Mom if you keep bugging me, I’ll never be ready.”

“Is there anything wrong. Can I help?”

“Just leave me alone. All my jeans are dirty.”

“It’s warm today. Put on some shorts and let’s go. Dad’s getting antsy.”

“No, my legs are all white and ugly and my hair – who did I get this bushy brown mess from? Have I told you how much I just hate it?”

“Yes, numerous times. Your curls are from my mother – your grandmother Willa. It seemed to work for Emma Watson in Harry Potter – remember Hermione Granger?”

“She’s a movie star. I’m *Brillo Pad Willa* at school.”

“Honey, we can’t fix that today, but I promise, we’ll check with a beautician to see what we can do to relax your curls. I’m trying to give you space but….”

“Try harder Mom…I’ll be down when I’m ready.”

Around four o’clock the family buckled their seatbelts and Matt shifted the Jeep Patriot into reverse, backing out of the driveway of their Lakeview home on Prospect Avenue. Willa nestled close to the window carping about a stomachache, arms folded across her lap at the sheer injustice of being hustled out of the house so fast she forgot her MP3 player loaded with her favorite Backstreet Boys’ hits. Gabe’s knees slapped together as he mouthed the words while reading one of his Encyclopedia Brown books. The catalyst of his imagination visible – he was the boy detective solving cases in the neighborhood. The whistling through the open windows brought to mind a wind instrument playing in harmony with Springsteen’s “Dancing in the Dark” blaring from the radio. Matt side-glanced at his wife, thunderstruck once more by her set-your-heart-on-fire-beauty. Summer was blessed with almond-shaped eyes as vivid as a gentian sea under a cloudless sky, and a long raven-tinted mane that drifted in the breeze like a mermaid’s weightless hair in a tide pool. The couple was finally doing something unencumbered and healthy. In an hour they would be soaking up the natural splendor of the Zoar Valley Gorge, absorbing the balmy weather, and, with a little luck, nestling back into symmetry, emulating the common place of Harper Lee’s fictional house of Finch.

Following Point Peter Road for about a mile they turned left onto Valentine Flats at the paint-peeling farmhouse where an American flag dinged against a tall metal pole in the front yard. The parking area dead-ended into the trailhead where the Mackies piled out of the car led by Matt and Summer holding hands while Gabe hop-scotched behind them. Willa followed, yawning, and lamenting at the cruelty of spending a Saturday with her lame family in the middle of nowhere. She could be hanging out with her friends or if her parents insisted on seeing waterfalls, they could at least have gone to Niagara.

The path from the parking area led to the top of where the trail down to the creek began. About halfway there, Gabe, jumping from one foot to the other, pulled on his mother’s arm and announced that he had to go to the bathroom.

“I asked you specifically if you needed to go when we got here.”

“But I didn’t hafta’ then.”

“Mom, like if it’ll shut him up, I’ll take him,” said Willa.

Broody clouds darkened Summer’s mood. “I can’t lose another child…” She gasped at how cruel her remark sounded, but as Willa walked away with a dismissive wave of her hand, Summer knew the dagger delivered to her daughter’s heart was already leaking contempt.

Matt put his arm around Summer, his knuckle stroking her cheek. Her eyes cut over to meet his. “I’m sorry for what I said. I just panicked at the thought of Gabe….”

“I know but smothering him won’t keep him safe. He doesn’t need anyone to hold his hand. And, after all he’s just going to the ‘forestroom’… instead of the bathroom…get it,” Matt snickered.

“Yes, clever but not funny.”

“My customers think I’m a hoot.”

“Owls hoot—don’t give up your day job.”

Gabe, unable to wait until the potty issue was decided, wandered off to find the nearest tree, stopping on the way to pick up and examine a flat rock. He rubbed his fingers over the layers before putting it in his pocket.

“Gabriel…hurry up. We’re waiting on you son,” hollered Matt.

Time is a foggy notion to a child and for Gabe it was reminiscent of a feather in the wind charting its own path with every gust. Waiting for him to return, the rest of the family soaked in the spectacular views and fields of wildflowers dotted with kidney-leaf and golden swamp buttercups swaying alongside northern white violets. He circled his tree twice while zipping his pants then gamboled back to where he had left his parents and sister. Before he could call out to them, he was distracted by a clicking noise coming from a stranger running by him. When he looked back, they had vanished.

On that fateful day, the whisper room again shouted Gabriel Mackie’s name. On this occasion the walls were moss-covered and painted quiet, the dirt floor moist with dewdrops, and the ceiling a canopy of nodding hemlock trees, sugar maples, and yellow birch shrouding a galaxy of stars flickering around an eyelash moon. Late night storms had cleansed the sky, and as the earth revolved, first light appeared hailing the onset of a new day.

Earlier, rescue teams rappelled two-hundred feet to the bottom of the Gorge, recovering the body of Summer Mackie face-down in the shallow water, dead at the scene. Willa resembled a hunted animal trapped in quicksand, her head whirling from side to side as if looking for an escape route. Dried tears streaked her face and blood dripped from the corner of her bruised lip. “We’re here to help young lady.” My name is Axl – yeah…my mom was a Guns N’ Roses junkie. What’s your name?”

“Willa. My arm hurts really bad.”

“Okay Willa. We’re going to get you out of here. A helicopter’s waiting to take you to the hospital.”

“What about my little brother? Did you find him, her voice as wobbly as an inflatable balloon advertising a grandiose event.

Gabe sat motionless against a tree close to where his family vanished; knees pulled up under his chin while helicopter blades whirled shafts of light in a circular dance overhead. *Daddy always said if we were lost to stay put and someone would find you.* Muffled voices pierced the stillness, but he withdrew deeper inside his safe zone instead of calling out, the small hairs on the back of his neck bristling until a man with a thick voice hollered.

“Sheriff, we gotta’ little boy missing – the sister asked Axl if we found her brother. I’ve got this lone shoe – it’s one of those fancy Converse All-Star Chuck Taylors. It’s got to belong to a kid.”

“I’m over here . . . can I have my shoe?”

Gabe, his face mucky with dried tears and grime, squinted at the man in a brightly colored safety vest. He reached for the shoe, slipping it on his socked foot, double knotting the laces. “I saw red balls in the sky last night,” he said in a small voice.

“Awesome. My name is Conner and I’m here to help you. What’s your name?”

“Gabe Mackie. My mom, dad, and sister left me . . . did you find them?”

“We’re going to take you to them.”

Sheriff McAlister and Conner escorted Gabe out of the forest and into a waiting ambulance where paramedics evaluated his condition, determining he suffered from exhaustion, hunger, dehydration, and a few bug bites, but no serious injuries. Before the ambulance door closed, Conner patted Gabe’s arm saying, “I’ve never met anyone who has seen those red balls—it’s called a red sprite. Astronauts are usually the only ones who get to see them because they form on top of thunderclouds and lightening triggers the burst of red light. You looked up just at the right time. They’re gone in a split second. You rest now. These guys will take good care of you, and I’ll see you at the hospital.”

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The Erie County Sheriff’s Department, with its storied past dating back to 1871 when United States President Grover Cleveland began his political career as Sheriff, is the oldest law enforcement agency, the largest in New York State, and maintaining jurisdiction for the Zoar Valley Gorge tragedy.

A witnessreported seeing Matt, Summer, and Willa standing on a narrow shale cliff leaning forward. Another stated either a man or woman described as slim-hipped wearing baggie jeans, and sandals, approached the family, while another described someone wearing a navy hoodie over a Buffalo Bill’s ballcap shouting at them before they disappeared. Another wearing coke-bottle glasses swore she saw all of them walk back down the path toward the parking lot.

Back in the Sheriff’s office, the response team assembled to evaluate the evidence and discuss the victims’ backgrounds. Conner spoke first. “Here’s what we’ve got so far. The family lost a young son three years ago in a tragic accident. Evidently, he was in the care of Willa, the mom’s biological daughter, when he died. Summer Mackie took a leave of absence for over a year from her job at Buffalo General Hospital due to her grief. She also volunteered with the crime victims’ assistance programs as administrator of the Facebook group page which kept her presence at the forefront of her advocacy. She was back working full-time in the crime victims’ treatment center at the hospital as a sexual assault forensic examiner until today.”

“So, she’s a doctor,” said Sheriff McAlister.

Conner pulled a notepad from his pocket. “According to the hospital, she’s a PA who, and I quote, ‘conducts medical and forensic examinations on sexual assault victims, works as an advocate for patients and families, and testifies in court and as an expert witness when necessary.’”

“See if our Mrs. Mackie made any enemies while doing her job. We might just turn up our mystery man or woman. Also, Axl check out that Facebook group. And while you’re at it see if there’s any dialogue on that other social media thing – the one with the bird. What do we know about the husband?”

“Matt’s family is from Texas, but that’s not a crime.” Conner moistened his lips, slumping down in his chair as his attempt to lighten the moment produced raised eyebrows and feigned laughter. Returning to his notes, he cleared his throat, “Matt’s dad played football for Texas Tech. Was an undrafted punter who joined the Bills in 1970 – the same timeframe as O.J. Simpson. He remained as the kicking coach after hanging up his pads. Opened Legends in 1995. Matt was born in our little piece of heaven in 1977. He graduated from University Buffalo and his dad turned the restaurant/bar over to him and his college friend when he moved back to Texas…It’s still the place to be and to be seen. He’s popular with his employees and customers…no red flags…no priors.”