

“Fairytale” by Stephanie Kuehnert

Carlisle was the kind of town where major events occurred about once a decade. The event that shook up Carlisle in the seventies happened early on, in the beginning of June 1972 when Eric Lisbon killed himself. The suicide itself wasn't shocking. Suicides happened often enough, and usually they were young men. In the early eighties when the food processing plant laid off 25% of its employees there was a rash of them. Same thing in the mid-sixties after three dry summers in a row. Eric Lisbon was exactly the type to blow his brains out. A high school drop-out that had never held a job for more than two weeks before he lost his temper and got himself fired, who came from a family that had been falling apart at the seams since not long after he was born.

“Yeah, saw that one coming,” Elisa Williams told Penny Trot in the church's basement bathroom after the funeral as she readjusted her nylons facing the dust-smudged, full length mirror that hung just to the left of the bathroom door. They were sticking to the sixty-five year-old woman's sweaty legs, barely concealing the purple ropes of veins that wound their way up her tree trunk calves with a bronzy hue that didn't match the rest of her skin.

“Too bad the family didn't. Would have saved them some... distress,” Penny replied succinctly, dabbing at her face with a moist paper towel, wiping away sweat, not tears. She had gone to high school with both Norma and Gary Lisbon and while she felt sorry for Gary, her dislike for Norma kept her from shedding any tears. It was a well-known fact that Norma flirted with every guy in JT's Tavern and she had a special affection for Penny's husband Steve, whom she had dated briefly in high school.

“Can you imagine... Took them eight days to find the body. Eight days! Can you imagine!” Elisa declared, turning around to face Penny, struggling to keep her wrinkled mouth in a straight, solemn line, but her dancing, watery blue eyes gave away the twisted glee she found in rehashing the horrible situation. She started to fumble through her purse for a cigarette.

Penny glanced to her right, away from the small mirror that hung above the single sink, at the older woman, her best friend’s mother-in-law, and knew she would be stuck in the tiny bathroom with her for the duration of that cigarette. Penny looked to her left, thankful that the frosted window was cracked open to provide some ventilation. Elisa still clung to the idea that women oughtn’t smoke in public. Penny smiled to herself as she reapplied the somber shade of lipstick she had chosen for the occasion. She knew she could get the most detailed version of the story the whole town was talking about from Elisa, and it would probably be as close to the truth as gossip could get. “So, it really took eight days?” she prodded.

Elisa nodded emphatically, “Oh yes. Norma called the police last Thursday, said she hadn’t seen Eric since Monday night. Gary said he’d heard the boy come in around three a.m. Tuesday morning, but nobody’d heard from him after that. Sheriff said he’d keep an eye out, but Eric was seventeen, most everyone figured he’d just taken off for a while. Then, as you know, this heat wave rolled in on Tuesday.” As if she had suddenly reminded herself how overheated she was, Elisa pulled the church services program out of her purse and started fanning herself. “Well, by Wednesday around noon, there was this awful stench coming from the basement.”

Penny’s hand fluttered to her throat as if she was suppressing the urge to gag, “Oh, Elisa!”

“Yep, Gary went downstairs to take a look, thought maybe one of the dogs had brought in a dead raccoon or something. He didn’t come upstairs for about an hour. Well, Norma finally figured out to go down there. Found ‘im in this bathroom they got down there. Real tiny room, probably as big as those two stalls put together,” Elisa gestured behind Penny to the two stalls. Penny winced, feeling suddenly claustrophobic, imagining a bathroom one-third the size of the one she was in, also underground, closed in by those thick basement walls. Elisa continued, “Two policemen had to pull Gary away from the corpse. He was solidly hunkered down. The body was wedged between the toilet and the sink and Gary had thrown himself on top of his son. Got himself covered in Eric’s blood and hair. Hasn’t spoken a word since he found the body, you know. That kind of close proximity to death’d make anyone a mute, if you ask me.”

“My God!” Penny’s face went slightly green and she was sorry she had fished for the detailed version.

“There’s been plenty of suicides in my time, but never a body rotting in a house for over a week before someone finally caught onto it.” Elisa shook her head and exhaled a large puff of smoke.

“It really is terrible.”

Elisa hesitated, glanced around the bathroom even though she knew there was no one in the two stalls behind them. She stepped closer to Penny, close enough that Penny could feel her hot, musty breath on her neck, but she didn’t reach out to touch Penny, just

met her eyes in the little mirror. “Terrible for his parents, yes, but that kid was no good. Did you see his girlfriend? The Carson girl? Did you see her?”

Penny nodded. Though Louisa Carson had not said a word throughout the entire service, had not carried on like Norma had, screaming at her good-for-nothing son, makeup smeared all over her pasty face, running from her bloodshot eyes, and tearing at her tangled, badly dyed hair as they lowered Eric’s coffin into the ground, Louisa had created a stir. Everybody had been staring at her.

“Covered in bruises head to toe? Did you see that?” Elisa asked. “Didn’t even try to cover them up, wearing that little black sundress. You *know* her doctor father doesn’t beat her. You *know* where those bruises came from. Now, that Louisa, she’s always causing trouble, at first I wanted to take that girl aside and tell her to cover herself up, but then I thought about it. I mean, was it really disrespectful to the dead if that’s what he did to her when he was living? And the family didn’t seem to notice her at all. I just didn’t know what to think. I still don’t know what to think. Maybe I shouldn’t say it, but good riddance. This is just a nasty situation all the way ‘round. People going to be talking about this one for a long time.” As Elisa stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray on the counter next to the sink basin, Louisa pushed open the bathroom door.

Penny and Elisa’s eyes immediately hit the floor as they shuffled for the exit, neither of them able to look at the girl. Louisa headed for the sink, turned on the cold water faucet with a steady hand, and began to splash water on her face and neck, pulling some of the droplets through her dark rooted, blonde hair. She glanced up into the mirror, wishing the rivulets that trickled down her face were tears, but she couldn’t cry for Eric. She hadn’t been able to cry for Eric since the first time he hit her. It had happened three

weeks ago, but her ribs ached whenever she thought of it. He had seen her talking to Michael Black, the singer/guitarist for Inkwell, the band that had opened for Eric’s band. After the show Eric had immediately pounced on her, dragged her outside to the farthest corner of the gravel-covered area that served for River Edge’s parking lot. He’d yelled first, not loud enough for the sounds to make their way back into the noisy warehouse; his words had probably disappeared behind her, into the thatch of trees. She didn’t remember them, she just remembered the punch. He had hit her right below her breasts, knocking the wind right out of her lungs and causing her to fall into a crumpled heap on the ground. Then he had pounded on her arms with his fists, kicked her in the ribs, the stomach before she brought her legs up to protect herself. After that he’d finally walked away, but not without spraying gravel in her face. Her tears stung and she resolved not to cry again.

Louisa stared at the bruises in the mirror, the ones around her throat like a gaudy necklace, the ones that trickled down from her shoulders and covered her arms, thinking she could distinguish each one, remember how it came to be briefly and then leave it there, buried in the church basement. It was over. Eric was gone and it was over. But each shove, harsh grab, pinch of her skin had happened so fast and blurred together, red, purple, and green all over her. The only thing she could remember clearly was the end.

She had gone there that day to tell him that it was over. She hadn’t spoken to him in over a week, but she knew that their relationship would not end until she told him directly. Louisa approached Eric’s house slowly, taking small steps like every movement she made hurt her slightly. When she reached the steps, she looked back down the long driveway at her best friend Molly’s car. She couldn’t make out Molly’s face, but she

thought she saw her nod, urging her forward. Eric’s small house, painted dark red, looked like an angry wound. The front door was on the left side of the house, concrete stairs led up to a small wooden porch painted white, but chipping badly. Louisa took a deep breath and walked slowly up the stairs toward the front door. All she could hear were her own footsteps and the squawking of the birds. Eric’s neighborhood was always so silent. She felt trapped as soon as she stepped onto the porch, the right side of it completely walled in by the front of the house. She stared at the wall knowing the living room was on the other side and hoping Eric wasn’t sitting inside there. That he hadn’t peeked through the heavy curtains that blocked the windows that faced the street and watched her arrive. The left side of the porch was open, except for a white wooden railing. Louisa sized it up, figuring she could leap over it if necessary, if she couldn’t get down the stairs. She tried to banish those thoughts though. She was there to confront him, to make him listen. And he would have to. This time. She reached for the doorbell.

An incessant ringing drilled into Eric’s dreams, finally jolting him awake. His hazel eyes flipped open like switchblades. The haze of sleep slowed him only briefly, “What the fuck.... Fucking doorbell! Better be something damn good,” he growled, but he suspected it was his mother coming home on her lunch break to tell him that if he wasn’t going to go back to school, he better get a goddamn job. She had never actually come home to check up on him before, but she had threatened it many times. He huffed, swinging his legs off his bed. That old woman had been digging into him so much in the past couple weeks, he wanted to strangle her, but he knew better.

Eric smoothed the black t-shirt he had been sleeping in and pulled on the torn blue jeans he had managed to drunkenly struggle out of the night before. His hazel eyes

darkened and scowl tore across his pale face. “Well, Norma, can’t believe you skipped your usual three vodka tonic lunch at the Tavern just to chew out your no-good son,” he muttered as he scrambled out of his room, across the living room toward the front door. He tried to get all of the sarcastic remarks out of his system because he did not feel like getting knocked around the house by her again. As much as Eric wanted to fight back, he knew he could never harm his mother, despite the fact that she hadn’t treated him with any affection since he was two years old, when his father had checked himself into an institution to deal with the depression that had been getting steadily worse since he had returned from Korea. His fucking stoic, ex-Marine father was the one he really wanted to bash, for just standing there and watching through those blank eyes as Norma drank herself into a fury and turned on Eric.

Eric was still zipping his fly as he opened the front door, figuring the best excuse for not answering fast enough was, “Sorry Ma! No, I wasn’t in bed, I was in the can.” Zip. Button. But before he even opened the door halfway, Eric saw that he was not facing his mother. She stood seven inches shorter than him, just like his mother, but, unlike her, Louisa didn’t have the sagging stomach and doughy cheeks of a woman who had devoted the past fifteen years to nothing but hard drinking. No, Louisa was just a girl. *His girl*. Or at least she had been until she had disappeared on him.

“Well, well, well, Louisa has finally decided to grace me with her presence,” Eric said, as he leered through the screen at the blond on his porch. Eric buttoned the top button on his jeans. “Oh wait,” he grinned, teeth sliding like ice over his chapped lips, “Maybe I should be unzipping? I don’t know if I can forgive you, but if you want, we can....”

“No! I'm not here for that.” The words rushed out of Louisa’s mouth angry and firm. She had been prepared for that. She knew it was the first thing he would say. But she didn’t know what would come next. She just wanted to tell him to leave her alone. *Better yet*, she thought, *he should leave town*. Whatever happened she had to make sure he stayed out of her life from that day forward. She would have Molly go get the police if it came to it. Louisa glanced quickly over her shoulder, the black car at the end of the driveway and the shadowed figure of her best friend inside it reassuring her. “I’m here for my... fairytale ending.” Louisa twisted her mouth and shoved her hands deeper into the pockets of her jean jacket. *Happily ever after*, she said to herself, *Eric leaves*.

Eric looked Louisa up and down, noting how her black skirt clung to her thighs, how her black boots cut into her calves. She had been such a beautiful girl when he had met her over a year earlier, standing in front of the stage at River’s Edge, staring up at him while he sang. Innocent green eyes, not a trace of makeup, natural honey brown hair, simple clothes, jeans and a flowered tank top. He knew then that she was his girl, the perfect girl. Then, at the end of that summer, she spent three weeks with a cousin in London. Slowly, she had started turning into the girl that stood in front of him. “Girls like you don't get fairytale endings.” Eric met Louisa’s heavily mascaraed eyes and stated, “Girls like you get exactly what they deserve.”

Louisa felt her skin burning with anger from the inside. She prayed that she wasn’t blushing. She wouldn’t let him think he had humiliated her again. “What do boys like you get?” she retorted defiantly, pulling her jacket closer around her body to shade it from Eric's eyes.

He just laughed. “Gee Louisa, what are you doing here at eleven in the morning on a school day? Finals no less? Ditched class to come see me when you knew my parents wouldn't be around? Or anybody else for that matter!” He stepped out onto the porch, screen door slamming behind him and flung his arms out as if to present the empty houses around him. Eric lived in one of the oldest areas of Carlisle. There were only five houses on his block, spaced at random like the last rotting teeth in an old man's mouth. They all stood empty during the day. Children at school. Fathers at the factory. Mothers there too, if they weren't waitressing or answering phones elsewhere.

Eric pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and pushed chin-length, dyed black hair out of his face. His long eyelashes fluttered as he lit the cigarette, and the sunlight on his face made him look younger than seventeen. In fact, Louisa realized, he looked just as he had the night she first noticed him. The light made his face glow just like that spotlight he had been standing beneath had as he sang and played his guitar furiously, making music that sounded so new, so real unlike the psychedelic haze that had consumed the end of the sixties. Louisa had liked that music, but she had been craving something harder, with an edge. And that was Eric. He was different.

Then Eric exhaled, his voice was like rubbing alcohol into a blister. “You're not going to be a drop out like me, are you, Louisa? What on earth would your mother say? What would she do if she found out what you were really like? Maybe I should tell her. Maybe that would teach you not to fucking disappear on me for a week and then come crawling back.”

Louisa cursed herself for letting the memory of how he had seemed when she met him flood back. After all, that was what had trapped her for so long. She went red with

fury. “I am *not* crawling back....” Louisa pulled one hand out of her pocket as if she was going to hit him, but Eric just ignored her.

“Maybe I should call your mother up and tell her, ‘Mrs. Carson, your daughter has gotten herself into some trouble. You know the troubles silly little girls get themselves into these days. Like your daughter's best friend Molly, barely sixteen, and now she's gone and gotten herself knocked up by that rich-boy-gone-awry Luke Parker,’” Eric paused dramatically to point his finger like a gun at the car at the end of the driveway, recognizing it as the one belonging to Molly’s mother.

Though she was far enough away that Eric couldn’t see her face and she couldn’t hear his words, Molly could see what was going on. She smirked at his pointing finger through the car window. She was stretched across the front seat of the old sedan, leaning against the driver’s side door, so she could watch everything while angrily braiding little bitty strands of her long brown hair. “Go ahead, Eric, say all you want, but you fucking touch her and I’ll be on you so fast,” Molly muttered to herself.

Eric spoke louder as if somehow through the rolled up windows and the noise of radio Molly would be able to hear his fake address to Louisa’s mother. “But Molly's got those bad girl genes, Mrs. Carson. She's the daughter of a whore and a drunk Indian who got himself killed before she was a year old. What do you expect? Don't give me that look, Mrs. Carson. Don't tell me that Molly is like a daughter to you and your doctor husband. Your daughter, your Louisa, is a good girl gone bad. Molly, well, I'd like to get into those bad girl jeans...”

Louisa clenched her teeth. “Just shut the fuck up about Molly, Eric. This is about you and me.”

Eric just batted his eyelashes and took one step toward Louisa. She refused to back away, but his proximity made the porch feel even smaller to her. “But Louisa, she’s in a lot of trouble now. And as her mother, you have to wonder how a good girl like Louisa could go so bad.” The rage was consuming Eric. His goddamn mother riding him and now this girl. This stupid girl who didn’t know what was good for her and couldn’t understand that he did. That he was watching out for her so she didn’t become some stupid slut, then some stupid drunk slut, and then a drunk hag like.... Eric pushed back his greasy hair and glared at Louisa, “Mrs. Carson, can you picture her, your Louisa, as I see her now? Standing on my front porch with hard eyes so angry they are black against her pure white skin. Lips painted red like an open wound. Silver bullet fingernails grown long and wild. Bleach blond hair glistening in the spring sun like a halo. Your little fucking angel Louisa. Oh, she makes me laugh....”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up, Eric!” Louisa demanded, voice like hot steel in the sun. This was not how she wanted it to go. She was supposed to do the talking, not let him go on one of his maniacal tangents like he had been for the past six months since she had shown up at his house for Thanksgiving dinner in a simple black dress that he had deemed utterly inappropriate for reasons she would never understand. Her father had bought that dress, why would her father buy an inappropriate dress? She seethed, thinking of it lying in a heap at the back of her closet because Eric had torn it off of her. “Shut the fuck up! It’s my turn to talk today!”

Eric pushed his face into hers like he was going to kiss her, but when he parted his lips he emitted a cruel cackle that lit up his hazel eyes and cut through the silence of the neighborhood, echoing on the small porch. “HA! HA! HA! Little sixteen year-old girl

trying to act tough. Yeah, your daughter was a good girl, Mrs. Carson, but she's in trouble. Do you remember when she went bad, Mrs. Carson? When little Louisa fell from heaven above and hit the common dirt with the rest of us? Do you remember how you tried to protect her? Bringing her here, to this quaint rural town, so no big city criminals could ever get to her? But it didn't work out, Mrs. Carson. I remember your daughter from fifth grade. From the day she moved here. Before she went bad. She doesn't think I remember, but I do.”

He closed his eyes briefly letting the image come back to him as it had that night at River's Edge when he noticed her again for what felt like the first time in years. His lips settled into a small smile that seemed almost peaceful. “A sweet, pale little girl, always wore her soft, brown hair in two braids. I remember the lilac dress she wore on her first day at school. And I loved her. I'm sure every boy in fourth through sixth grade did, but I really loved her.”

Anger broiled in Louisa's green eyes, which she targeted right on Eric's eyes as he opened them. “Bullshit. You didn't love me then and you never have. You're too diseased to love anyone!”

Eric kept his eyes locked on Louisa's and didn't flinch at her words. “I remember her long brown curls, nose buried in a book, like a good girl should be.” he paused, hoping good girl Louisa would defend herself, that she would get down on her knees on the chipped porch floor in front of him, flutter her eyelashes, and spit out helpless apologies to remind him that she was still there.

Louisa shook her head and tightened her jaw. “Eric, just stop it. No more of this twisted shit. This time you are letting me talk.”

Eric was disappointed; just a few days away from him, and Louisa had started acting hard. “And sure,” he continued. “She hung out with wrong-side-of-the-tracks Molly, but that was nothing compared to that crowd she started running with in ninth grade. Those kids from River’s Edge. I’m sure she told you, ‘Molly and I just go there to listen to the music.’” Eric mimicked Louisa’s voice with a high-pitched whine. “Yeah, right.” He shook his head, but the movement was so small and sharp his chin just seemed to move. “They called you up, didn’t they, at the end of Louisa’s freshman year? Said, ‘Mrs. Carson, you better watch your daughter. She’s cutting class, running with the wrong crowd.’ But you still believed in your little Louisa, didn’t you? She kept her grades up. That kept you and the doctor happy. She could still get into some posh *liberal arts school*, maybe even go *Ivy League*.” Eric sneered. He hadn’t even realized he had been watching Louisa for so long. Just thought she had caught his attention when she came to town and then again when he noticed her at River’s Edge for the first time. She had been good. Even better than he had realized when he had started dating her and he had known then that she was the best thing that he would ever have in his life. He had known then that he would be so good for her, make her even better. And *she* was fucking it up.

“You don’t fucking know me! You don’t know anything about what I want or what my parents want for me!” Louisa spat, her finely arched eyebrows sharply angling down as her angry frown tugged her face into a mask of rage.

Eric’s eyes glazed over, livid. He continued, “But did you look at your daughter, Mrs. Carson? DID YOU LOOK AT HER AFTER SHE CAME BACK FROM LONDON? Did you see how she bleached that pretty brown hair white like a whore’s? Did you notice how those t-shirts started getting tighter, her skirts shorter, tights torn? Did you smell her?”

Baby powder fresh tainted with cigarettes and booze? Did you meet her friends? Did you watch her flirt with those bad boys? Boys with police records longer than your grocery list? Do you know your daughter, Mrs. Carson? I'm looking at her right now. She's backing me into the corner of the porch, against the wall, and I know what your little Louisa wants....”

Louisa stepped slowly toward Eric, forcing him into the corner of the porch, just to the right of the front door. His hand shot out, up Louisa's thigh, and she jumped back at an angle, toward the railing behind her, to the left. “DON'T FUCKING TOUCH ME! If you try to touch me again Eric, I swear to God...” Louisa screamed at the top of her lungs like she used to at his shows, except instead of adoration there was fury.

Eric mockingly put his hands up in the air, slowly letting them fall back down to his sides as he continued his tirade. “Mrs. Carson, little Louisa thinks she's a girl from a fairytale and I'm the big bad wolf. Like she's too pure and good to get into this kind of trouble all by herself. Like she's a princess who is going to wake up. But she's not because she's in trouble with me.”

Louisa pointed a shaking finger at him. “No. No, *you* are in trouble with me.”

Eric ignored her. “I know you thought I was just another one of those bad boys, Mrs. Carson. Another one of those punks your daughter would hang around for a month or two. Part of her bad girl image. But I fell in love with your Louisa because I knew she was a good girl. I knew she was a good girl to the core. Bad boys don't want bad girls, Mrs. Carson. A bad girl is just a whore. Bad boys like me love good girls. Your Louisa is sharp, beautiful, and she loved me more than my mother ever did. And didn't you see how I loved your daughter? Didn't you see how made her stop wearing those slutty

clothes? Made her get rid of those no-good friends like Molly? Made her pay when she misbehaved?” Eric squeezed his eyes closed, tears forming in the corners. *I am so good for her and she doesn't even know it*, he thought.

Louisa stared at him, so flabbergasted that her face went slack and expressionless. She saw the tears, the passion. “You’re totally fucking crazy,” she told him in enraged whisper. “Totally fucking crazy. You call that love?” She let her voice get loud and shrill. “YOU CALL THAT LOVE?”

Eric opened his eyes wide and looked right into Louisa’s. “I disciplined her the way you never did, Mrs. Carson. Girls who grow up that smart think they can always get their way. She had to learn, so I taught her. I fucked her good, too. Yeah, I fucked her like good girls trying to be bad girls ought to be fucked. I made her get down on her knees on the dirty bathroom floor in my basement. That disgusting closet of a room. I made her lay down on that cold concrete and I fucked her until she forgot how to cry. I jammed her head underneath the sink and fucked her until I was done. I fucked her until she was timid. I fucked her like that all night until she went running back to no-good Molly. But low and behold, today she's shown up at my door and your little angel Louisa is in trouble now! I'll touch you if I want to, Louisa! What are you going to do about it, little girl?”

Eric’s hand darted out toward Louisa’s shoulder, but she slapped it away. She wanted to throw up after hearing him describe their last night together. She felt her stomach clench as the smell of piss, mildew, and whiskey came back to her. He had pulled her into the basement bathroom, smaller than the tiny front porch, a toilet in the far corner, sink a few feet to the left of it, and just enough room for a person to lie down in

front of them. He had dragged her down there, his fingers leaving another ring of bruises on her upper right arm, because she had told him that she was through with him, he was too drunk, too violent. “I’ll show ya too drunk!” he had screamed at her the entire way down. First he had tossed her on the cement floor and climbed on top of her, holding down both of her arms with his heavy hands. When he was sick of that, he forced her to stand up, pushed her back against the wall and wrapped his right hand around her throat. “Stop fucking screaming! No one is going to hear you!” he had kept repeating, even though she didn’t recall making a single sound. After that he pushed her down onto her knees, shoving her head beneath the sink, banging it into the pipes, went at her from behind. She almost lost consciousness then, soon finding herself on the floor beneath him again.

Louisa’s limbs felt weak and loose as she remembered crawling out from under him after he had finally collapsed into a drunken sleep. Wandering out into the basement over to his father’s collection of guns. Picking up a handgun, wondering if she would use it on him, on herself. But instead she had taken it and run, clothes torn, bleeding, all the way home, still feeling his weight on her chest. “No, no,” she shook her head, shaking herself out of the memory, the ends of her blond hair stirring up the air around her violently. “I LEFT you. I’m here to tell you that you better not *ever* come near me again.”

“Or what?” Eric challenged, teeth gleaming beneath his smirk as if he was ready to bite into her.

“Or…” Louisa stuttered. “Or me, Molly, and Luke will beat you so bad you won’t ever be able to show your face again in this town. In *fact*,” Louisa’s voice suddenly

strengthened, “you should get out now. Fucking leave. I’ll let Molly tell Luke what you did to me and—”

Eric cut her off with a cackle. “And what? If you ever EVER leave me again, I’ll get you and your friend Molly. I’ll fuck you both so good that you’ll never be able to whisper about me, you won’t even be able to whimper. She won’t have to worry about marrying Luke Parker because I’ll cut that baby right out of her,” he pulled the knife he always kept clipped to his belt out, flicked it open.” I’ll kill her for trying to get into *my* business. So, tell me, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT, LITTLE GIRL?” he taunted, his eyes, black with anger, reflecting the gleaming blade.

And Louisa was silent like she had been for too long. She closed her eyes and slowly pulled her right hand out of her pocket. Eric watched her lift the gun she had kept hidden in there.

“Oh,” he laughed, “Oh I see. I guess I haven’t fucked the bad girl out of her yet, Mrs. Carson. I guess she’s crazier than I thought. Your little Louisa has just pulled out a gun. Your daughter, Mrs. Carson, is in a lot of trouble. She’s fucked up really bad....”

Louisa wrapped both hands around the heavy black handgun that she had stolen from Eric’s basement. *Only as a last resort*, Louisa had thought over and over again since she had taken it. *Only as a last resort*, she had dreamed, knowing it was shoved in the drawer of the nightstand beside her. *It’s my last resort*, she thought as she wrapped her finger around the trigger, everything silent except for Eric’s voice. He continued to mock her as she raised the gun to his forehead. *Last resort*.

“Molly, where are we?” Louisa struggled to open her sticky eyes.

“We're halfway between heaven and hell,” Molly responded with a weak laugh. She knew it wasn't funny, but laughing was the only thing Molly felt she knew how to do. Louisa squinted through the darkness and watched Molly pull back her long brown hair to light a cigarette. “What? Did you think it was all a dream?” Molly asked, wiping the sweat from her face and then tossing Louisa the cigarette pack.

Louisa caught it and noticed the blood crusted in her fingernails. When she looked down and saw it spattered all over her t-shirt, her face went pale. She reached up tentatively and felt it matted in her messy blond hair. “Kind of,” she replied hoarsely, trying to remember how pulling the trigger had made her whole body shake.

“Did you think you'd wake up and we'd be little girls again camped out in front of the TV at my grandfather's house?” Molly asked, closing her eyes and absentmindedly running her fingers over her large, rounded belly.

“Kind of,” Louisa repeated, trying to picture the look on Eric's face when she shot him at point blank range. Then Molly stood up and she didn't have to. Eric's forehead was caved in like a rotten melon, his taunting hazel eye missing from the right side of his face where the bullet had entered. His ripped skin looked like papier-mâché that would never dry, singed black and red. All that was left of the back of his head was shattered pieces of skull, red gore, and tufts of his greasy black hair.

Molly blocked her view of the body and forced Louisa to meet her steady eyes. “Don't black out again, Lou. I mean, thank God you came out of it enough to help me carry this asshole down here, but I had a heck of a time cleaning up the mess on the porch. We're going have a lot of rags to burn. It's spotless up there, though, and there's plenty

of blood to spread around down here.” Molly smeared a bloody rag across the wall behind Eric’s body, then quickly shielded Louisa from it again.

Louisa was getting paler by the second, her eyes looked glazed. “Guys like him shoot themselves all the time, Louisa.” Molly said firmly. “He had no future. No one will even question it.” When Molly had heard the gunshot, she had thought for a moment, *we committed a crime*. But that was immediately erased when she remembered how bad Louisa had looked when.... And then, as Molly had reached Louisa staring at Eric’s slumped body on the porch, Louisa had said, “He was going to kill you. He said he was going to kill you and the baby.” Molly hadn’t had a second thought since, that bastard had deserved to die.

“I killed him, though, Molly,” Louisa stammered.

“No, he killed himself.” Molly insisted, her face stony.

Louisa blinked, trying to focus on their surroundings. “Where are we?” she gagged on the words, answering her own question. The bathroom. The dirty gray concrete. Eric's body slumped between the toilet and the sink. It smelled like piss and disinfectant. It smelled like being on your knees.

“Give it to me,” Molly stated.

“What?”

Molly answered with a nod in the direction of the toilet. Louisa's painted fingernails clattered against the gun; it felt so much lighter now. Molly wiped it off on her sweatshirt and eased it into Eric's hand, hooking his finger around the trigger.

Molly opened the heavy, brown door to the bathroom and pushed Louisa out in front of her. Molly pulled the door shut with her sweatshirt still covering her hand. Then

she pushed Louisa in front of her, up the basement stairs, out the back door. Louisa stood blinking in the sun as if she were seeing the outside world for the first time.

Once safe inside Molly's car, Louisa let her head fall onto Molly's shoulder, tears rinsing the blood from her eyes. “But I,” Louisa began, her face contorting like a small child's when shocked by the realization that she has just fallen hard.

“No,” Molly reminded her again. “He killed himself. No one saw you, no one heard you, no one will ever think otherwise, and you shouldn't think otherwise either.”

Louisa nodded, but she looked down at hands, still speckled with blood. “His blood will always be on me though,” she said, voice cracking. “I'm cursed.”

“No, you're free.” Molly pressed Louisa's hand to her big stomach; the baby was kicking strong and hard.

“It's ok, little girl. We'll only tell you stories with happy endings,” Louisa whispered.

Molly added, “It's ok, little girl, you won't grow up like this.”