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BARE FEET

By Ryann Dannelly

Every step I take is carefully planned for this is not the first time I've maneuvered my way around my house without making a single noise. I know one small slip up on an unforgiving floor board will give my position away to the one person I'm very good at avoiding. Instinctively I slow my steps when I reach the middle of the hallway. This section is known to tattle, it groans loudly under the weight of walking feet.

I count each step; one, two, three steps perched on the tips of my toes. A side step on a dead spot on the floor, and my slow dance continues. One, two, three, four more delicate steps and I reach my destination. I pause to listen for a pursuer, but I hear no one. I'm safe. I face the closed white double doors in front of me, my bare feet digging into the plush white carpet. The only reason I'm standing in front of her door is because I know she's not in the room behind it. She's sitting in a metal chair with a purple cushion on it, in the kitchen on her laptop. I know not to put my guard down even though she's sitting an entire floor below me. She has ears like a hawk, no, better than a hawk.

I raise my right hand to the round brass doorknob and begin to turn it to the right. The inside of the doorknob is clicking, but I don't stop turning it. The quiet clicking noise is muffled by the humming air-conditioning unit in the wall next to me. I keep turning the doorknob until I hear the final definitive click. The sudden high pitched ringing of the doorbell breaks my concentration.

"For Christ sake," my mother screams. I jump and try to scope out where the boisterous voice is coming from. My mind races as I try to remember why I wanted to get into my parents' bedroom in the first place as I frantically search for the woman with the boisterous voice. I expect to see her standing somewhere on the third floor landing, but she is nowhere to be seen. I can hear the skidding sound of the metal chair scrapping along the wooden floor as she stands up in the kitchen. Even from my position at the end of the third floor landing, I'm able to hear clearly the sound of her one-inch high heels clapping on the floor as she leaves the kitchen and heads toward the basement door.

"Do you know what time it is, Megan?" she shrieks down the basement stairs. Her voice sounds anything but dulcet as it reverberates around the entire house. I breathe in a sigh of relief. I'm still safe. This attack is not meant for me. "Your ride's here," she screams again. I can hear the light footsteps of my eight-year-old sister as she prances up the wooden

basement stairs to our waiting mother. "You need to grow up and remember your own schedule for once," my mother yells as the feet of my sister dart around her. "Get outside now," she yells as Megan races toward the front door. The sound of Megan grabbing her ballet bag in the hallway and sprinting out the front door is accompanied by my mother's voice muttering a few choice words. I hope Megan made it out of the house before the stream of obscenities was loud enough to distinguish actual words.

The house is quiet once more. I can hear the digging of my mother's heels as she walks back to her chair in the kitchen and sits back down. Turning back to face the door, I go through the entire process of silently turning the doorknob, which could really use a proper oiling, once more. I tiptoe into the bedroom and close the old wooden door behind me, silently and just as carefully. Realistically I know that a feeble old stained door will not keep my mother from finding me if she really wants to, but I still feel safer with a barrier between her and me.

The appearance of the empty master bedroom momentarily calms me. The afternoon light coming through the two open windows is bouncing off golden walls and onto old wooden furniture. As I shift my positions at the entrance, a bright reflective light catches my eyes. I look around for the source and finally discover the light is coming from the dresser. Slowly I walk over to the dresser on the right side of the room and pick up the golden picture frame. I can feel a smile spreading across my face when I look at the picture. The photograph was taken my grandmother seven years ago at the Pacific Beach in California. Five bodies with smiling faces are piled onto an inflatable pink tube bobbing in shallow ocean water. My entire family and I had just ridden a wave all the way to shore. No one had fallen off and we hadn't flipped the tube. This four inch by six inch picture managed to capture a smile on everyone's face as we all squinted at the camera.

As I stare at the photo, I realize I remember what happened seconds after the camera clicked. Our celebration continued and I laughed with my mother over our accomplishment. My little brother Ben, days away from turning six, was bouncing on his section of the tube in pure glee. His feet were splashing about in his excitement as he extended his skinny arm and gave our dad a high five. I watched as Ben bent over the tube and down into the water. In a flash, he had thrown what he thought was pure ocean water into the air in an act of celebration. What he didn't know was that his small fist had grabbed sand as well. When he threw the water into the air, water

and sand splashed down into our little sister eyes.

Megan was sitting contently on our mother's protective pregnant lap when the sand and salt water hit her in the face and matted her dark brown curly hair. She immediately started crying, which was quickly followed by my mother cleaning out her eyes and tickling her round belly to make her laugh again. Our mother turned to look at Ben who was staring at Megan with the panicked expression of someone who knew he had just done something wrong. She gently told him to be more careful around the baby before smiling to let him know everything was all right.

When I hear the sound of her chair grinding once more along on the wooden floor, I realize my hand is shaking, and the picture frame bobbles between my fingertips. I quickly set it back on the dresser so as not to make any more noise. I strain my ears once more to hear what my mother is doing. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten seconds of silence. The only sound I hear is the quiet humming of the air-conditioning and the loud thumping of my heart, which feels as if it's about to rip its way out of my chest. I try to reassure myself that she must just have been repositioning herself on the chair.

I'm still safe. Slowly I turn around to face the king size bed with its old wooden frame and yellow patterned comforter. I walk on the tips of my toes to be sure I don't make a sound. One, two, three slow steps and I reach the edge of the bed, her bed. The question of why I'm standing here rattles around in my brain, but I try to tune that thought out. I know I don't have a rational answer to that question, and I know I should leave the room just as quietly as I entered before she hears me, but I also know I won't follow my own advice.

Carefully I climb onto the bed as my mind once more tries to convince me to leave the room and I once more resist. I let out a slow silent breath because I've forgotten how incredibly comfortable this bed is. My body tries to relax itself as I lie down and look up at the ceiling. My feet dangle from one end and my head from the other. It feels strange to be as tall as the bed is wide. I didn't used to be this length. I try to think of the last time I was on this bed, but my mind comes up empty, so I roll over onto my stomach in frustration. Why can't I remember? There's a neat pile of books below the open windows on the carpet. A layer of dust has gathered on Julia and the Wolves, the book on top of the pile. The edges of some of the others, like James and the Giant Peach, Lassie Come Home and The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, are curling due to the morning dew that comes through the always open windows.

That's when the answer comes to me. I remember when I used to think this bed was the largest bed in the world. I used to sit in a curled-up position every night during elementary school along with my brother and sister. Mother would read to us every night like clockwork. The bed always seemed so large and there was always plenty of room for everyone to nestle comfortably with room to spare in case our dad joined us. I used to look forward to nighttime, when we would all pile around her and listen to her voice as she read to us out loud. We would all laugh and smile as the story progressed and inch closer and closer to her when the suspense got scary.

"No fucking way," I hear her scream. I bolt to sitting on her bed and look around like a deer in headlights. The room is still empty and the door is still closed. I hear her feet storming out of the library and toward the staircase leading to the third floor. My hands ball into tense fists as I slide off the bed in anticipation of whatever will soon happen. "That little piece of shit," she yells as she races up the stairs at a pace that isn't comforting. Instinctively I count her loud steps as she climbs the stairs – one, two, three, four, five steps. There are 15 steps on this staircase. I know I don't have more than a few seconds to prepare myself.

I rack my brain for something I've done that might have resulted in her current rage. My bedroom and bathroom are a mess, but she doesn't know that. I go back to counting – nine, ten, eleven steps up the stairs. It doesn't matter what her reasoning is now. She'll be here soon enough and everything will be revealed. I brace myself for the impact of the double doors flinging inward as she reaches the top of the stairs. I listen to one, two and three more of her steps before I realize something is off. Her steps are taking her in the opposite direction from her bedroom. She isn't coming for me. I'm still safe. I breathe in a sigh of relief. She's headed toward Ben's room. I hear her opening Ben's bedroom door with a thud much louder than necessary and I wonder if she's succeeded in breaking the door or the wall. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Why the fuck did you not turn in four assignments last week?" she screams. "Shit Ben, you're failing three of your classes now. I hope you're proud of this because no college is gonna' want to take a kid who doesn't give a fuck about his schoolwork. Hell, you're headed to the front line of the army to get shot at and killed. Is that what you want," she yells even louder.

I know what's going to happen next. It's happened so many times before. Ben will yell back at her, which will only prompt her to get more aggravated with him. I know they will continue screaming without re-

ally listening until one of them breaks down into tears. The first one to cry loses. The only person who can even attempt to end their fights in anything but tears is my dad, and he is currently at work. All he does is work now because it's his escape out of the house.

I force myself to move away from the bed. I don't want to hear another round of their fight. I don't have to sneak because I'm no longer concerned with her hearing me. She's a little busy now. The only thing I want to do is put as much distance between the screaming and me. My feet carry me across the master bedroom and into the walk-in closet so I don't have to hear them.

I make myself keep walking into the closet without reaching up for the light switch. There's no need for the light to be turned on; I can see well enough by the natural light that spills into half of the closet, and I know I'm not actually looking for anything. I move deeper, into the dark part of the closet, my mother's side of the closet, in an attempt to muffle the noise, counting my steps to drown out the screaming – one, two, three, four steps deeper into the closet until I reach the furthest depths.

Back here, I'm almost invisible, but I sit down on the ground in an attempt to make myself blend into the darkness completely. There's a large clear plastic box to the right of me on the ground, a colorful poster board pressing against it. As I reach my hand up to open the lid, I realize what's inside and stop my hand – so many forgotten art projects from when I was in elementary school.

I was seven-years-old the summer day the colorful poster pressing against the side of the box was made. Our mother had set up an elaborate finger painting workshop in the middle of our front yard and told us to do whatever we wanted with the paint. No one was sure how to start. We all looked at her for guidance and received an understanding smile in return. She told us we were allowed to get as messy into the paint as we wanted to, as long as we were creating something. To make her point, she dunked her right hand into the blue paint and her left hand into the yellow. I watched in silence as she painted beautiful designs with her hands on the white poster board while singing, "Here Comes the Sun" right there in the middle of our front lawn. When she was finished she walked back over to where my brother and I stood and placed one of her fingers on each of our noses before wiping her paint-covered hands across her white shirt with a smile.

The sound of the double doors slamming open with entirely too much force jolts my hand into the side of the box. I don't dare move from my position on her closet floor now that I know how truly close she is.

There are no longer layers upon layers of walls separating me from her. I try to keep myself from panicking by reminding myself that she doesn't know I'm in here. I can tell she's still fuming about her fight with Ben because her feet are pacing in loud unproductive circles around the room. I wonder if she believes she won this round. My nerves are so tightly wound that I'm sure I'm going to accidentally make some sort of sound that will reveal my position. I try counting her steps to calm myself – one, two, three, four steps to the right followed by one, two, three, four steps to the left. Repeat.

After about fifteen seconds of listening to her pacing she suddenly stops. I haven't truly breathed in twenty seconds, and I suck in a much needed breath while listening to her steps pick up as she heads back toward her bedroom door. I breathe in a sigh of relief as I slowly stand up. This is my chance to get out of her room. My left foot is about to take the first step toward the front of the closet when I realize something isn't right. The sound of her feet has stopped and I can't tell where she is.

"Paige," she shouts from the entrance to her bedroom. I jump and almost fall onto a pile of clothing on the floor before regaining my balance. The truth of my situation comes crashing in around me. I'm not safe. I'm trapped. This time she's calling for me and I have no excuse. The closet is getting smaller and smaller and I know if I don't get out soon I will suffocate. I inhale a shaky breath and force myself to move one foot in front of the other as if teaching myself to walk – one, two, three, four, five indecisive steps toward the front of the closet. As I lift my right foot to take the sixth step, I hear the phone ringing. I stop walking and listen.

I hear my mother walk away from the closet door and back into her bedroom to answer the phone on her bedside table. Even from the closet I can hear as she audibly sucks in a breath to calm herself before picking up the phone. "Hello," she says cheerfully.