

### 30. TOTALLY ALONE

I was a little late at school. When I got home, Bill was ready for another angry confrontation.

“June said that someone went through her purse. It wasn’t me, and it wasn’t Josh. It had to be you.”

It sounded like something that Josh would do. And he’d find a way to blame me. He was angry from the last time that we had got into it. This was his double revenge.

“You’ve already made up your mind. What do you want? I’m not going to confess to something that I didn’t do.”

That was exactly what he wanted. He was trying to break me down. If he was successful this time, his rule would be absolute.

“You were being so good! Now we’re going to have to be really severe with you.”

“Shit! Quit accusing me if you don’t have proof.”

I could tell that he wanted to hit me. I stepped back just to be safe.

“Why are you lying to me? We’ve caught you red-handed.”

“Caught me how? Where’s your evidence?”

“You’re not in court, little lady. We ought to call the police.”

“Great job at parenting.”

“Quit making me the bad guy. You took the money.”

I shrugged my shoulders and threw my hands in the air, “What are you going to do now? Search my room.”

“We already have. We don’t know where you’re hiding the money. But we know you have it.”

If this was the end result, I should have just taken the money and got out while I could.

“What are you going to do to me now? I’m already a prisoner in my room. Are you going to stop feeding me?”

“We’re going to do something to teach you a lesson, to let you know that you can’t get away with acting like this.”

“There are laws.”

“You’re the thief.”

I was angrier, “If I’m going to take the punishment, I should at least have the rewards of my supposed crime.”

“You have a lip on you, Chloe.”

“And you’re going to slap it off!”

“I’m going to do what I have to so that we can restore order.”

“How do you know that Mom didn’t just spend the money? It’s not as if she’s an expert accountant.”

“She said that she just went to the bank. So she didn’t have the chance to spend it. You took it. You knew that she was going to the bank.”

“Fantastic detective work.”

I wanted to blame Josh then and there. He knew that I would be accused. It just seemed too convenient.

I went up to my room ready to face the infinite wrath of Bill. June was off fuming somewhere. She had her own version of things.

At dinner, June let loose, "I wish that I never had you. You're the kind of daughter that every mother dreads. You're always smarting off to me. And now this. You've been stealing from me all along. I starting reviewing things. And I've always been missing money."

Josh sat across from me with his hideous little smile. He was succeeding. I wasn't going to play cop and investigate his theft. There was no point. It was more about trust.

Rose mused, "I'm surprised that they even let you come to school."

"I am too. I think that they wanted to chain me to the bed."

"That come next. And then no dessert."

"If I'm going to be punished, punish me for something that I've done."

Rose suggested, "Random drug tests."

"I'm not going to pee into one of their cups."

"They'll get the school to do it for you."

"I for one think that it's a little perverse to collect all those cups of pee."

"Just a little!"

"Sure, babe."

We didn't pursue it any further. We just stared at each other and giggled.

When I got home, my room had been rearranged. The bookcases had been changed. Everything was piled in a new order. It seemed so antiseptic.

"We still haven't found the money."

Bill scowled at me.

"You didn't find it, because I never had it."

My mother had pulled out a bunch of my dresses and laid them on the bed.

"Where did these come from?"

"Either you bought them for me, or you gave me the money for them."

"Really!"

"A lot of this stuff is old."

"I don't recognize them."

It wasn't as if she had that great a memory anyway.

"I wouldn't have had the time to buy anything with the money if you just lost it."

"Lost it. You stole it."

She pointed her hand in my face. Then she pushed me on to the bed.

"June, that's enough."

"Bill, we've got her admitting that she took it. I don't want to give up now."

"You don't want to assault her either."

"Are you feeling sorry for her now?" She lifted her hand as if to strike me. He held it in place.

"We'll carry on with this later."

June had waited years for this moment. She finally had a basis for her stupidity.

"Spare the rod, spoil the child!"

I did have money, and I needed to make sure that they hadn't find it. I checked my hiding place, and it was safe. Way down at the bottom of the closet. But how long could I be safe here?

They were not only making the present horrendous, they were dooming my future plans.

I imagined them waking me up in the middle of the night to interrogate my dreams.

“Are you having impure thought?”

“Are you dreaming about boys?”

“I am dreaming about you leaving me alone.”

I really did want to see June in a favorable light. It was damn near impossible. She had made her own bed, and it wasn't pretty. She wanted us to believe that she had curtailed her dreams to have a family. This was the furthest thing from the truth. She came and went as she pleased. She wasn't tied to keeping the house spic n' span. If it wasn't me doing the chores, then she'd hire a maid. And she'd even disparage the assistance. It was the June show around the clock. Even when she slept, a flame burned bright for her dominion.

Most of all, she didn't want a daughter who could answer her back. Out of sight, out of mind. I was one of her many underlings. So be it! She still would prance around the living room as if she was in a fashion show. We were always expected to be her willing audience.

Perhaps, I could have given her a break. I was in school. I had a life ahead of me. She didn't have that much to look forward to. Bill was never the charmer. And Josh was a dullard, almost by her intention. So here it was, she and I. And never the twain would meet.

I wanted to strip away the contrivance. If I was playing the part of a daughter, then she was doing the same as a mother. Could I see her for what she was in some kind of appealing way? I wanted to be more open to her intentions. There was simply no access. She was all closed within herself.

I had tried again and again. Here was the woman who had raised me, and I could barely find a pulse. You had to know that in her worst moments, she imagined bundling me up and taking me back to the cabbage patch where she found me. She'd look down at my features and wonder how anyone could be persecuting her so. My devilish grin only reminded her of the hell on earth that had been prepared for her.

She recognized me as the bane of her fate. She couldn't help but admit that she had made it her mission in life to make me miserable. I hated feeling sorry for myself. I knew how much this all sounded like an extraordinary exaggeration. But I kept giving her the benefit of the doubt. And there was no return in my favor. She delighted in even more pain on my part.

Some people might have thought that she was preparing me for the harshness of reality. Those types are the worst sadists. If a child is nurtured, she can naturally find her way to common sense. But June did everything that she could to stunt my growth. She was counteracting evolution by condemning the species to a permanent Dark Age. In the end, her intent had the reverse effect. I became cleverer than ever. But I had a deep mistrust of my own mother. And nothing that she did would allow me to overcome that feeling.

I had all the clever answers of youth. And I was so ready to dismiss the concerted efforts of a parent. Of course, June hadn't been handed a manual on how to be the perfect mother. But if she had, she would have done everything the opposite to what the good book said. She only wanted the instructions that confirmed all her prejudices.

Despite all her attempts at stunting my growth, why had June failed in her endeavor. What had made me too smart for my own good. Quite early on, I realized that something was off. Bill had not intended to be my ally. But he was a willing respondent to all my questions.

Once he gave me a few choice answers, that hardly stopped me from seeking more. And he seemed to love the challenge. I tried to stump him, and he did his best to fill me in with everything that he knew. I understood mechanics and used its strict model to map the rest of the universe. And books offered me the dialogue that June had withdrawn from me. With my knowledge, there was no way that I could tolerate June's dictatorship of the spirit. I needed freedom under any cost. It wasn't about the well-being of the body. The body would find nourishment once the soul was able to occupy a place upon the world. I sought my island paradise.

Under the circumstances, it might have appeared that Bill was hardly the model of obnoxiousness that June was. That hardly gave him license. He was there doing June's bidding like there was no tomorrow. The security system arose out of the marvel of his feeble brain. It was better for him to spend time with his gizmos than with his daughter. He did what he could to hold me together in mind and body. But his blessings were almost accidental. He did the bare minimum to meet his obligations. Then he cast my fate to the wind.

Bill continued to evoke associations of fear in me. Why? It remained a mystery. Maybe it was a premonition. Or a vague memory. Something was strange about that man. It probably wasn't as bad as Rose made it out to be. But it was pretty serious. His supposed concern was hardly good reason to stay around here longer than I needed.

I had always been suspicious of Bill and June. But Rose asked me to consider another, more sinister possibility: that my whole life had been a veil of illusion that I had created to comfort myself about some deeper trauma. I recollected the horror of my night with Adam because it revealed a pattern of more lurid experiences that I had been able to repress. And my one frightening memory was only a construct that allowed me to store all similar experiences in the back of my mind. But if I opened the door to that incredible chamber, I would finally confront the most reprehensible creatures known to mankind. I accompanied Rose on her drunken escapades as my way of forgetting such pain. But our adventures only made us vulnerable to a succession of more and more grisly encounters with a truly vile sort.

With her encouragement, I came to relish my dance on the wild side as a way of trying to still the chaos that shook at the foundations of my being. At my most desperate moments, I considered the possibility that Rose was simply an invention on my part to justify my own depravity. And I assumed this alter ego to justify my descent into the ultimate perversions. Rose was restrained by no inhibition. Ultimately, she lived for nothing but pleasure.

When she related her tales of abuse, they were nothing more than my own aberrations. And I simply created safer versions of the monsters who populated her nightmares. Bill and June were cruel, but they were nothing compared to Rose's guardians.

The more I thought about the idea of a parallel life, the more it scared me. It wasn't simply an inkling of a garish existence. I felt run through and through by this vision. And I could sense a succession of disasters multiply around me until this abundance of anguish became too great to bear.

I knew that I would have to cross the threshold of my nightmares to confront the demons that populated this bedlam. It was an asylum from which I could never escape. No wonder I took comfort in the suburban bliss of Bill, June, and Josh. They were hardly the raving lunatics that embraced Rose night after night.

In her world, there was no respite. That was why she turned to hedonistic stimulation to sustain herself. She needed the numbing affects of drugs and alcohol to help her navigate life's deformities. That was why she gave little credibility to my version of the incident with Adam. For her, this was par for the course. She took her own resistance as totally ineffective in warding off such attackers. So she pretended that she went along with her own abuse. The thought freaked me out. Why had I found appeal in her forbidden nights? I must have realized how I was surrendering my will to these powerful forces.

Did she long for a deeper liberation? What was she trying to tell me about my own nature? I tried to maintain a pretense of restraint. Rose mocked my prudishness. Was this only an act, a stage in my overall exhibitionism? Was this greater proof of the use of my alter ego. After a few drinks, would Chloe succumb to all the excesses of the lusty Rose? Was I incapable of controlling myself? This may have been the key to my behavior. And it was also why I had this more intense fear of Bill.

My excursion into madness seemed all too exaggerate to be true. But it had a real appeal in trying to explain my insecurity. There had to be more to my psychological imbalance. And Chloe seemed like a thin mask of personality to hide the source of these mysteries.

I had seen too many horror movies. And I was giving in to their absurd premises. I was letting my imagination run away with itself. Nevertheless, I wondered what had been so disturbing in my past. Why had Rose seemed like the perfect guide to direct me through this absurd wonderland?

Whatever horrible events that I had suffered in my past, there were hardly as intense as the unknown that awaited me. I tried to convince myself out of running from my present. But there was no alternative. I had been made a prisoner in my own home. The die had been cast. It would only be a matter of time before I had to endure the worst. It was better while the choice was my own. I may have been forced by the circumstances. But I could still make the moment of separation my own.

Rose offered me a helpful suggestion.

"Where are you going to be staying? At cheap flea- bag hotels. Even that 's going to be thirty or forty dollars a night. You'll be broke in no time."

"What's my choice?"

"I've got this aunt in Omaha. She's pretty cool. I've always thought about hanging with her."

"All that I've got to so is make it to Nebraska."

"I can email her. It's a plan."

I woke earlier than usual. I wanted to get up and out of the house before Bill. There was nothing dramatic in the moment. It felt like any other night. My motivation faced me in all its rawness. The feeling was almost shocking. I was struck by my feelings of regret. I had no idea what had taken me to this point. And I wanted to pretend that I could go back to how things were. I tried to recall the girl that I was before everything had gone down. I wanted to believe that I had been more carefree.

Through my memories, I kept returning to June's image. And she always gave off the same attitude. I could hardly recollect a time of peace. She always had an agenda. And she was always do her utmost to interfere with my life. I observed the scathing judgement rendered

against her. I did what I could to soften the onerous resolution. But my heart spoke against her. How could I possibly see it any other way?

June was a hapless creature with only a limited ability to comprehend how far she had pushed things. I could no longer accommodate her edicts. That was that.

I had gathered all my stuff together, and I was ready to venture out. My exit was going to be as easy as any other night that I snuck out. This was no different. I still had possibilities.

I had already prepared myself a snack for the road. I made sure that my money was in my bag. I had a quick bowl of cereal and a couple of pieces of toast. I brushed my teeth downstairs, and I was ready.

I sat at the kitchen table and stared out the window. There wasn't much to see. An occasional breeze wafted the trees. I told myself that I was ready to go, but I could go anywhere. My plan was coming apart before my eyes.

Perhaps, I needed something more drastic to usher in my plan. I couldn't break something. I didn't want to draw attention to myself. I had no desire to leave a note. I was going to simply disappear. I couldn't even do that. My presence became more and more real. It seemed to light up the still dark morning.

This was not going to be the time. There was no way that I was ever going to be able to do this. I had been a wonderful idea. But that was all that it was. I couldn't get up the nerve to walk out the door.

I rushed up the stairs. I put my backpack down on the ground. And I closed my door. I lay down in my clothes on the bed. I wasn't going anywhere.

I wanted an endless sleep to carry me away. I would travel to an enchanted land without June and Bill. I would have no friends. But I would meet new ones. Everything would be wonderful. I'd have a place to stay. No one would hassle me. The world would be fantastic.

I let myself drift off to sleep. Maybe I just needed the therapy of my dreams to carry me away from my troubles. I wasn't about to solve the problems of the world. All I had to do was lay low, and Bill and June could do nothing to me. They gave me a life. They fed me and paid for all my expenses. Maybe they would one day buy me a car. I had little to complain about. I would deal with it. I wasn't like Rose. I wasn't going to get too dramatic about things. And whatever had happened to me, I wasn't going to let it affect me.

Eventually, I could get job. I could save my money. When I was eighteen, I could move out on my own. There was nothing that they could do then. For now, I could deal with it.

The land of nod revived me. I no longer felt like a runaway. I had found my place in the world. When I finally woke up, Bill and June were long gone. And I still had time to make it to school.

I put away all my clothes. I packed my bag with my books, and I rode my bike to class. So much for my silly plan.

"You were ready to go. What happened?"

Rose quizzed me at lunch.

She continued, "I was sure that you were gone for good. I was expecting an empty seat across from me."

I played with my lunch. I should have brought my snack with me. It would have tasted better than this grub. But it also would have reminded me of my failure.

“You’re never going to go, are you?”

“I don’t know. I thought that I had everything worked out. Then it all just drifted away on me.”

“Need some motivation?”

“You can do what want to try to encourage me, but in the starkness of the morning, I’m the one who’d going to have to push myself out the door. And I just can’t do that!”

“Take a leap. Come over to my place. I can get you out the door.”

“That’s not going to work. That’ll just implicate you in my mischief. June and Bill will have you arrested in a heartbeat.”

“I think that is your problem. You never let them catch you. Then they would have been so strict that you would have had to walk out for sure.”

“Maybe I could leave during the daytime. It would be so much easier.”

I thought about that alternative.

“That will never work. You’ll already be integrated into the day. You just go along with your normal routine.”

“Instead of going home after school, I can just ride away.”

“How far are you going to get on a bicycle? We’ve been through this before.”

“OK, you’re right. I just don’t think that I really want to do it. I had my chance. And I just froze. It’s not going to get any easier.”

Rose reminded me, “June and Bill are going to piss you off again. Then you’ll just up and go.”

“I thought that was what I just did.”

I imagined Bill tinkering with the alarm system. If he could just close that door permanently, I would be their prisoner forever.

Rose challenged me, “I know that you’re thinking about that damn security system. How long will it be before it is too late?”

I wondered just that. I felt beside myself trying to figure this all out. Bill had no idea that he was sealing my fate. It was only another game to him. I felt so out of touch

Rose helped to lift my spirits. I wasn’t going to let my hesitation destroy me. There would be other opportunities. We had worked out all the details. I only had problems with that final step. Next time I would succeed.

At home, Josh started pestering me. He thought that he could get my goat, but I totally ignore him.

“What’s got into you?”

“Rough day at school.”

For a second, he seemed sympathetic. I looked at his face in an effort to see an ally. But his eyes continued to reflect that nasty stare.

“You’re not going to help, are you?” He didn’t hear what I said. I went up to my room.

Nothing in my present was going to save me. I used to think that I could own the world. Now I couldn’t even own myself. How had the world slipped from my grasp.

I did everything that I could to get out of eating dinner with Bill and June. It was almost as if they felt that they had to teach me an urgent lesson.

“I made something special for all of us?”

What was it now? Lasagna.

“That’s going to be a little heavy. I need to stay awake to study. I’m not looking forward to weighing myself down and getting drowsy.”

“I’m not going to take no for an answer.”

Was that it? I had my excuse. I was going to run away simply because I didn’t like what we were having for dinner.

“Get cleaned up for dinner!”

What did she mean by that? I hadn’t been rolling in the mud. I didn’t look unpresentable. Why did she always have so much more to say to me? Nothing was simple with June.

“I’m your mother. I can’t be something more than that!”

Was she reading my mind again? I had to close that portal.

“No, I’m getting ready to eat!”

When I finally sat at the dinner table, I surveyed my opposition. Josh seemed his usual self. I needed to avoid eye contact. That would only challenge him to make a wise-ass remark. Bill wanted to play along with June’s intent, but he had trouble wading through her obsequiousness. For my part, I realized that if I ate too quickly that June would think that something was going on. But if I took my time, I would have to listen to the interminable banter. I stared at my dinner and tried to shut them out.

“Don’t just look down at your food. Talk to us!”

I wasn’t in the mood for Mommy playing the role of my therapist. I did what I could to thread the needle. Then I gradually worked my way out of the family round table, and I was again safe in my room. How many nights of this could I endure? I felt like the victim at an anatomy lesson.

“I wanted to kill her.”

“Have you ever wondered if she put something in your food? You’ve read those stories of moms poisoning their families.”

Rose had a big smile on her face.

I asked, “What about those kids who get a friend to kill their parents?”

Her smile grew bigger, “Are you asking me to help you out?”

“Didn’t Ricky Young do something weird like that?”

“That was just a silly rumor. He brought this girl back to his place. And his mom and her just went at it in the living room. Ricky was the one who called the police just to get them separated.”

“Rose, you’re making that up!”

“No, seriously!”

After our crazy talk, I was hardly willing to face Bill and June for another grueling dinner. I needed to figure out a way out.

“Your father’s going to be home late tonight. Unfortunately, we’re not going to share family dinner!”

“I was looking forward to it.”

“Sweetie, you’re going to have to get something on your own.”

“Are you going to wait up to eat with him?”



“I had a big salad at lunch.”

I had gotten a reprieve. Maybe this was my signal to go once and for all.

My desire to leave was so totally focused without any possible impediment in its way. All that I had to do was walk out. I could simply open the door and never look back. But I wanted someone else to lead me on my journey. If he could take that first step, I would be right behind him. I was ready to follow.

I felt paralyzed. And the hesitancy on my part started to grow. I wasn't going anywhere. I watched this wall build until I could no longer see beyond it. I had no hope of ever making it out. I was trapped in my routine, and that was that. Maybe I had an opportunity. But I watched as it slipped by me.

How had my fear become so totally overwhelming? I was facing my complete helplessness. Alone, on the road, I would be an easy victim. I could barely defend myself. One false move, and I would be toast. I had rehearsed my plans in my mind. But that meant nothing. When faced with every kind of threat in the world, I knew that I would melt into a puddle of rain water.

I slinked around my bedroom weighed down my weakness. I was sinking into the floor. This was embarrassing. I sat on the bed in an effort to get my bearings. I was again a prisoner. My sentence was read to me, and I had to admit the permanence of my state. Who would rise on my behalf? The outside world was mute to my cries. And I could do little to mount a challenge to my dreadful situation.

I could hear the naysayers who mocked me. They felt that my emotions had gotten the best of me, as indeed they had. Anything less, and I would simply be ignoring the mischief perpetrated by my jailers. I could not ignore Bill's and June's intentions. At their worst, they left me alone and pretended this was all my doing. And as the torture got the better of me, I succumbed to the final stage of their domination. I was giving up.

I was the informer. No wonder, their method was foolproof. They exaggerated the threats of the outside world. And these images played their shadow dance in my mind. These were the bogey men that swallowed little children. I had always found their fairy tales preposterous. But now I was the victim of their narrative. They had succeeded.

They didn't need an alarm system. They had their ideology. And as it soaked its way into my very being, I was ready to confess. I had been monstrous. I had paid them no heed. I had snuck out at night. I was now ready to accept any punishment that they were ready to dish way.

I wanted to sit them both down at the dining room table and read a list of my faults. For these and all my sins, I was truly sorry. Where would I ever discover the requisite forgiveness? I wanted Bill and June to grant me absolution.

They would never grant any mercy. For the supposed foolproof nature of their method, this was the one flaw. There was never any real intention behind their actions. They were simply vindictive. They acted as if they were trying to teach me a lesson. But their nastiness was totally random in character. And it affected me with all its brutality. This was beyond rationality. And they hoped for a supremacy in this absolute terror.

The haphazard character of their actions affected me even now. They had done nothing, and I could feel the walls closing in on me. Their torture had morphed into an even more

frightening mechanism. I had started out with dreams of quitting this place. Now, I was simply battling for my life.

Again I considered a quick exit. It would be all that I could do to end the craziness. Even in my desperation, I couldn't do a thing.

"You're not ready to go yet!"

"Rose, I know that. I just feel that I'll never be ready."

I was waiting for her to remind me about some fatal flaw in my character. But she did what she could to cheer me along.

"This is all part of the process. You're going to make it out."

"Eventually. When I'm older, I can get a job. I can have my own place. Maybe, we can be roommates. I'm just not supposed to leave any time soon."

"Don't get discouraged so easily. You just have to give it that extra push."

Rose's words invigorated more than any lunchtime meal could. I emptied my tray and headed back to class.

I followed a trail along the map of the United States.

"Chloe, are you with us?"

"No, I'm lost somewhere in Wyoming."

Everyone laughed, but the humor didn't play well for the teacher. She wasn't sure what to answer back.

This was my destiny. Like a history challenge. I was ready to assume my role in lore of America. The land called out to me.

"So you are ready to head West."

"Anywhere but here!"

The other kids looked on me as a freak, but they really appreciated my levity. They were the chorus that I needed to help face my enemies. They must have known already about Bill and June.

"You escaped from Alcatraz. We didn't think that anyone could get out."

"The easy part was getting over the wall. But the currents were crazy. I almost drowned."

I envisioned myself being stopped like Spider Man on the wall. There I was with a light shone on me. An easy victim. It would only take one hero to bring me down for good.

"No one makes it out of here alive."

That was my cue. I would have to descend into the underworld. There I would discover who I truly was. With supernatural powers, I could overcome those who stood against me. I had walked the line at school. This would be simple.

The signs were abundant. Everything told me to leave. But I couldn't move a muscle.

"Chloe, are you OK?. The school bell rang."

"I'm just off on a journey in my mind."

"Just keep your eyes on the road signs. There are dangers ahead."

As I rose from my seat, I smiled at my teacher.

I spoke under my breath, "Maybe, this is the last time that we ever see each other. Thanks for the inspiration."

I rode home with sense of purpose. I had been dragging my feet too long. I had been

trying to second guess myself. But there was only one option for me. I was more than ready.

I again went through all the preparations. What made me think that this time would be different? I knew what would happen. I would open the door onto the beckoning day, and then turn around and go back to bed. I couldn't do it.

Bill and June were no longer enforcing their mandatory dinners. Especially this week, there were too many conflicts. So I was finally left to my own devices. Their nagging ghost weren't there to haunt me.

"You think that you're going to look up in the sky and the stars are going to say yes to you."

I had been looking for signs. But the answer was locked inside of my body. And I followed the curves of the muscles until they truly made sense to me. This was the response that I sought. No one could tell me to stay. I had given myself permission to go.

I felt things untangle. When I stood up from my bed, I had a new confidence. Everything was packed. The moment seemed somewhat anti-climactic. I was going.

No one heard me on the stairs. I could have been going to a party. But I was dressed for something more formidable.

I loosened the lock on the basement door. Bill had not yet driven that final nail into my coffin.

Outside, I heard the train pass. And the siren cut through me. I stopped in my tracks. There was no turning back now. I just had to keep on moving.