

Whisper

By

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Excerpt

***Whisper* is the story of one girl's struggle for survival after realizing the true nature of who she really is.

1
The Letter

Mother flattened the tires on my brand new Ducati. She yanked the largest knife from the kitchen block. Traipsed across the yard in her robe and slippers. Sat down on the curb and stabbed the front tire.

I watched from the window, realizing mid-swing on the second tire what she had done. I ran outside, barefoot, half dressed, shrieking as if the intensity of my voice could halt the sweeping motion of her arm. “Stop.”

I couldn’t stay idle while she robbed me of my freedom.

“Stop, stop, stop.” Too late, within seconds the rims rested on airless rubber tubes. But I continued stomping toward her, as if my crazed tirade could reverse the damage. “Hell if I let you do that to my bike. You can’t take everything from me.”

It’s not as if Mother ever took anything from me, but she’d just trashed the one thing I loved the most. I was out of my head, possessed. I’d never talked to Mother that way, not ever. But I should have known the Ducati or any motorcycle would have been a showstopper for Mother.

She brushed past me, cucumber calm. “Girls don’t drive motorcycles.”

I could barely catch my breath, but I got snarky. “You’re right. We ride them.”

“You know the rules.”

“Rules.” I followed her into the kitchen. “About girls riding bikes? This isn’t about that. You’re so fucking controlling.” The second it left my mouth I knew I’d not only crossed the line, but I’d decimated the point of no return.

“Under my roof, Heather,” she hissed. Threw the knife into the stainless sink with a loud clank. “Watch your vulgar mouth.”

We stood in absolute stillness, the ticking of the clock echoing in the kitchen, stretching the seconds into a game of silence. Finally, Mother dragged the back of her hand across her forehead, let out a long sigh. “Motorcycle accidents aren’t like car crashes. They’re deadly.”

I locked my arms across my midsection.

Mother squeezed my shoulder. “Or crippling.”

Slowly, I calmed. Releasing the fury that had twisted my mind and squeezed out the beast in me. “But it’s mine. My motorcycle,” I pleaded. “I know how to ride.”

Mother leaned within an inch of my face nose-to-nose, so close I could see my reflection in her eyes. She rubbed my arm. “Sell that two-wheeled coffin,” she said, in a husky, crackly voice. “Life’s too precious.”

I broke away. Went straight to my room on tiptoes as if I were walking on sharp blades. I was sneaking off to save my Ducati. Mother didn’t know me, not anymore. I could handle my bike, better than most people.

I hid in my closet and called Hobbs, a mechanic and sometimes friend. I paid him double to come over and replace the tires. A nighttime job, while everybody slept. I planned on using my *around-the-corner* former parking space. I’d lie to mother, something I rarely did. But if I wanted my ride, I had no choice. I couldn’t undo my stupid mistake of bringing the bike home. Mother would monitor my every move until she trusted that I sold the bike. And I just couldn’t bring myself to do that.

The next morning, I punched the code for the garage on the button panel, nothing. I looked through the window. Hobbs left the bike inside like I asked him. I turned toward the house. Mother stood at the back door, behind the screen.

“Don’t mess with me on this,” she said.

“But I know what I’m doing. I know how to ride.”

And like ground hog’s day, we had the same argument all over again, only I upped my rage. Fury, fury, fury, it made me so blurry, blurry, blurry.

Several fuzzy minutes later, Mother waved me inside the house. “Just go to your room.”

“I’m nineteen, you can’t just—”

“And you can still go to your room.”

That sucked. I spent a restless dreary day of missing my ride because I couldn’t have it, and wondering how long it’d take to find my way back into Mother’s good graces.

I went online and discovered Mother had blocked me from my trust fund. We weren’t rich, but I did have access to money Granny left me. I never knew how much I liked that cash until Mother shut it down. I crept downstairs, found her puttering through the living room. Humming and dusting, as if nothing had ever happened.

I stood at the base of the stairs, gripping the rail. “Granny wanted me to have that money.” I missed that old woman so much. Granny was the only person who understood me.

“Granny also wanted you to live a long time.” Mother flicked the feather duster my way. “I thought we decided you’d kill yourself on that thing. Especially in L.A.”

“You don’t get it. You don’t get anything.” I pushed off the railing. My fists balled up so tight, my fingernails cut into the palms of my hands. “You didn’t even cry when she died.” My mother, the ice queen didn’t shed a tear over the loss of her own mother.

“Don’t be so dramatic. Of course I cried.” She bit the inside of her cheek and looked away. “You’ll see one day, when I’m gone.”

Mother and I had never had a fight this far off the chain. “I’m the one that’s gonna be gone soon, not you.” I tried to hide the spoiled whininess in my tone, but the brat in me didn’t let up. “I could leave.”

Mother flinched.

Since Granny’s death, she’d become so controlling. But I supposed I’d gone the opposite direction, wild. “I can do whatever I want. You can’t rule me forever. I’m an adult now.”

Her posture stiffened. She took a good long look at me. “On paper you’re an adult.” A somber heaviness oozed from every pore of Mother’s body. She gazed at me with such intensity I thought she’d explode. Then, suddenly, she softened. If I hadn’t been watching her, I might not have noticed the odd shift.

“But what’s the rush, dear?” she said, syrupy and nicey-nice. “You’ll reach my age and wonder what happened. Slow it down. Seriously.”

I stomped off to Granny’s old bedroom, craving her energy. Searching for the positive chi vibes she’d infused into my life. Granny would have loved my Ducati Scrambler. She’d have understood the sense of freedom, the force of the motor roaring

under my bum. Granny's favorite stupid word '*bum*' made me smile, in spite of the epic battle with Mother.

But as I stepped through the door to Granny's bedroom, my insides sank like the Titanic. A bleach odor masked the lavender scent that used to wash over me. No lacey bedspread or frilly knick-knacks. Granny's mattress had been stripped bare. A few boxes sat on top, most likely everything she'd brought with her. God, I might've been young, but I couldn't imagine seventy-eight years of life equaling four cardboard boxes.

Mother's curvy handwriting appeared sloppily across each box. My head nearly imploded. How could mother pack Granny's room and not tell me?

She'd labeled three Goodwills and one attic box. I ripped off the lid on the attic box and searched through Granny's angel collection, her bible—her romance novels. Underneath the books, I found a thick stack of papers. I sifted through a bunch of receipts and notes. Everything Granny and I had done since she'd come to watch over me, senseless to Mother, but I cherished each piece. At least Mother had the decency to save some of Granny's things.

Granny had been the best anti-parent ever. She reminded me of the way Mother used to be when I was little, before the rigid ruler took over our lives. Together, granny and I flipped the finger at Disneyland, a representation of perfection that didn't exist. She took me to the beach and helped me create lopsided haunted sandcastles lined with cigarette butts. We ate greasy food, drove without seatbelts, fed the birds and the lizards. Thoughts of Granny's infamous story telling skills, when she mixed up fairy tales, made me smile. I missed her.

Seemed like yesterday when Mother left on that long trip and Granny showed up at our front door. They never spent any time together. Something I understood when it came to my Mother. She'd changed. I didn't want to be around her either.

A thick envelope had been wedged between the comic section of the L.A. Times and a Tofu takeout menu. I peeked at the letter inside. Water damaged, worn to a pulp. I unfolded it and held the paper toward the window, trying to decipher the few legible words.

"Heather, where are you?" Mother's voice vaulted up the stairs and came at me like a demanding sow, needling me.

I examined the envelope. Mother's name, Alice Larsen had been perfectly handwritten across the center above our address.

"I'm going to the store. Answer me, Heather Ann Knolls."

The return address displayed, *Ryan Knolls*, my deceased father. Funny, I read his last name at the same time Mother had said mine.

"Say something dear or I'll come upstairs."

The postage stamp had been dated only two months prior. That didn't make sense, a dead man can't write.

"Darling, I don't want you splattered across the highway."

"Leave me alone, Alice Larsen," I yelled her name right back at her, thinking that not using her mother title would bother her. But nothing affected Mother. "Just . . . give me some space."

"You'll come 'round," Mother said. "It's for your own good."

I heard the front door close, but I stayed focused on the smeared words. *Sorry* appeared in the letter a few times and something about his prison sentence. I grabbed the envelope and read the return address. *Vassardale Prison*. Oh God, there had to be more information in this box somewhere. I ripped open one of the Goodwill boxes and dumped Granny's clothes on the bed. I tore the box to shreds, slicing my fingers and leaving me in a puddle of guilt.

"Sorry, Granny," I whispered.

But then I ripped open the other two boxes and checked every crevice for any clue on my imprisoned father, nothing but clothes. I couldn't think straight. Why didn't I know this? Why was this kept from me? Years of asking Mother about my dad and he was alive? Master sergeant in the Army . . . dying on the battlefield . . . dead before my birth . . . my ass.

In that instant, I decided I'd leave. Mother couldn't stop me. Certainly, she didn't have the right to hold my motorcycle. My finger traced along the return address. Vassardale prison in Vassardale, Colorado. I could find him and talk to him.

I wondered how Granny came to have the letter and why she never told me. But Granny would never keep anything from me unless Mother insisted.

Dammit, Mother would control my breathing if that were possible.

I'd had enough. I took every bit of cash I could find in the house, including Mother's stash in the fake spray can under the bathroom sink. I didn't steal. I've never been a thief. I convinced myself that Mother could replace her money with cash from my trust fund. No guilt in taking what Granny wanted me to have. Besides Mother had forced my hand.

I grabbed my travel pack from the top of the closet, loaded it with clothes, my make-up bag, and a flask. A rush of adrenaline zipped through my veins. If Mother caught me with the pack, she'd find a way to lock me up forever—a slight exaggeration, but that's how everything felt since Granny died.

I circled the garage with my legs literally shaking in my boots. I kept an eye on the driveway, half-expecting Mother's Cadillac to screech up the concrete path and interrupt my escape. Maybe a part of me hoped she would. But I continued with my slipshod plan, determined to take action, even if it scared me to the bone.

It took me thirty seconds to discover the only way inside that garage would be through the side window. I ran into the house and found a hammer in the junk drawer. Jogged to the window and then beat the hammer on the surface. Glass shattered everywhere. I didn't think about the jagged edges. I could fit my skinny body through the windowpane, but I'd get thrashed. I hurried into the house again, grabbed the stool and hesitated at the front window, searching the street for the Caddie or any approaching car. Nothing. So I dragged the stool through the backdoor and outside.

Glancing down the driveway, with my heart pounding in my ears, I boosted myself to a standing position on top of the stool at the window. I carefully reached my arm inside. I flipped the lock, and shoved the frame up. I climbed through the open window with ease.

Now I really needed to get going. But Mother had somehow completely disabled the electronic opener and removed the pull cord. I thought about using the chainsaw, but I could barely lift the thing. I shoved the metal hedge trimmers under the garage door and

wedged the panels open. I rested the door on the stool and rolled my bike outside. I didn't even leave Mother a note. I just took off.

2
Smoke Creek

I left the broken garage door propped on the stool and headed toward Colorado, finding my way to Interstate 15. About three and a half hours later, near Las Vegas, I refilled the tank and kept going. Seemed like I traveled as far as I could go in one sitting when I found myself in Smoke Creek, Nevada, a few miles from Utah. Using my fake ID at the Straw Mill Packaging Company, I bought a pint of cheap tequila and a bag of nuts. I swigged straight from the bottle and then took a few seconds to fill my bedazzled flask. Focusing on the dribbling liquid slowed my racing mind and started me down the rabbit hole.

I'd made a huge mistake.

Running away like a crazed lunatic hadn't stopped the twisting knot in my stomach. I forced myself to relax and gather my thoughts. I needed a plan. But I believed I also needed to put more miles between Mother and me. She lied to me for nineteen years.

My hand trembled as I lifted the flask to my lips. It felt like my heart trembled, too. I looked around the dusty two lane roadside town and realized I'd never been this far from home on my own. My windpipe narrowed as I held back tears.

"Big baby," I whispered.

It took me about five minutes to completely chill. I stood there talking to myself. *You can do this. Just keep going. One foot in front of the other . . .* on and on until I needed no more convincing.

After a few more gulps of tequila, I stuffed my laptop in my travel pack and walked to the *Bacon Egg Surprise*, a shaggy diner a few blocks up the road.

I sat at the counter with my flask beside me and pulled my laptop from my travel pack.

A wiry thin waitress dropped a cloudy glass of water in front of me. “Internet’s spotty at best. Want a burger?”

I shook my head. “Bacon and eggs.”

“For supper?”

“It’s past dinner time. Call it an early breakfast.”

“Suit yourself.” She shuffled into the kitchen.

Alone in the tiny diner, I searched for a signal. A slow hiccupy process, exactly as the waitress had warned. But I got online. Not a single thing about Vassardale, Colorado or Vassardale prison anywhere I searched. The place didn’t exist. It wasn’t on any map or in any county website. Another drink of tequila and my head began to spin. My phone chimed with another missed call from Mother. She’d been trying to contact me all day. She even sent text messages, something she never did. It started with: *Call me*. An hour later: *I need to tell you something*, and then a few minutes ago: *We can work it out*. I don’t know why, but it felt like a trap. I just couldn’t respond, not yet.

The waitress slammed down a plate in front of me and took off. Goopy over easy eggs, yuck.

“I meant scrambled eggs.” She kept going, as if she heard nothing. “Miss?” I couldn’t stand the sight of runny yolk. I rudely snapped my fingers to get her attention. She stopped. I waited for her to turn toward me, but got distracted when my head began

to tingle. It felt as if an invisible pressure wrapped around my ears, legs, and arms, and then as if a tight bubble squeezed my entire body.

“Can you scramble these eggs, please?” My words sounded flat, as if the café had become a deadened sound chamber. No noise from the kitchen. No hum from the appliances, just complete and utter silence, the loudest form of quiet in the absence of sound.

I looked closer at the skinny waitress. She stood mid-stride. I walked toward her. But with each step I had to push, like I was wading upstream through a thick pool of air. I stood at her side. Her eyes didn't move. “What in the hell?”

I waved my hand inches from her face. No response. I snapped my fingers in front of her nose. “Hello?” I said.

The sucking pressure instantly released from around my skin and a huge pop resounded in my ears. My voice reverberated in a whisper, an echo of everything I'd just said. “. . . what in the hell . . . hello?”

Skinny girl ran into my hand and halted. “Huh . . . how'd you do that?” She wrinkled her brow and looked at my empty seat and swung her head toward me again. With a quizzical look on her face, she asked, “Did I miss something?”

I snapped my fingers again and she instantly froze, completely motionless. I trudged to my flask and peered inside like there would be an answer in the tequila. Maybe I was having another black out, except that suddenly, I felt real sober. The sensation around my skin had tightened once more. I quickly realized nothing moved except me. The total solitude freaked me out. One more snap and motion launched at once, as if I un-paused a movie. My ears popped, loud.

Skinny girl sped through the swinging doors shouting, “Scramble ‘em, Huck. Got a live wire out there.”

A second later, she came bopping through the doors again. Headed straight toward the counter and grabbed my plate. “Sorry, doll.” Off she went.

I sat there baffled, flexing my fingers.

I went into the restroom and splashed water on my face, not even caring that my make-up smeared. A cold perspiration broke out across my body. I had no idea what was going on with me.

In the mirror, my reflection stared at me, a stranger who resembled me but looked different. My medium length brown hair had a smattering of white streaks throughout and had grown longer. The thumping of my heart pounded double-time in my ears. I reached for my phone to call Mother and stopped.

I supposed most people my age would call their mom, but I couldn’t bring myself to do that. No telling what she’d do. I pictured my fingers cut open and every specialist on the planet hired with my meager trust fund, doing whatever they could to make me safe from this outrageous *snapping* thing that caused the pressure of the world to wrap around my skull.

Mother ruled the safety of my life, extra cautious about everything, so of course she’d go bonkers over something this bizarre. I couldn’t call her. I couldn’t go home, not now.

Granny, help me.

I lingered in the bathroom, pacing back and forth. I snapped my fingers over and over. My watch confirmed that with each snap, time stopped.

Seemed like a few hours passed. I had to pull it together and face the world. I wrapped my *now* long hair in a bun and returned to the diner. The table and everything about the room looked exactly the same. The clock on the wall displayed 9:18 p.m. Three minutes had passed, not a few hours.

Impossible.

I wondered what I should do about this. Maybe it would pass. I could survive on my own. Mother and Granny taught me that much.

I'm no dummy.

But this thing . . . this strange thing that was happening to me didn't even have a scientific foundation. The waitress brought me another water, and my once brown hair that had changed into a white streaked bun, made no impact on her whatsoever. She barely looked my way.

"Is there a place to crash for the night nearby?" I asked.

"Trucker motel up the road."

I wondered if they took cash. Using one of Mother's credit cards would be the last thing I'd do. She'd find me. I'd be stuck for good. No bike, no truthful answers, and no father.

"You need anything else?" she asked.

A new Mother or better yet, my Granny returned from the grave.

"You good, hon?" she said.

"Just the check."

I had no choice. I had to find my father.

