

Chapter One

Air rushes at my face. I stretch my legs out and pump higher. I love swinging. The feeling of freedom it gives me. The way air blows away the pressures of school and life. I love the smile it puts on my face and the peace that floods my heart.

My sister, Meg, swings beside me, squealing with delight. "Mattie! You're so high!"

The day is one of those bright, crispy ones in mid-November. Clouds drift over the pale, blue sky. Leaves flutter from the trees, sprinkling soggy green grass with pretty dabs of red, yellow, and orange. It's a day to play in the park, act silly, and be a kid again.

I bend my knees, letting my body drift back and forth. Fall is my favorite season: a last-minute splash of color before winter brings on the steady gray of Oregon rain. I breathe in the cool, sweet crisp air, pulling it deep into my lungs. My body slows until I drag my feet to a stop.

"Time to go, Megsy."

I've taken care of Meg since she was born. The two of us are so close, it's as if Meg and I are one person, just living life at six and sixteen. If anything happened to her, my body would rip in half. All the love in my heart would bleed out, soak into the soil, and be gone forever.

Meg hops off the swing and grabs my hand. "Sundays are the bestest day of the whole week." She swings my hand extra high. "Mommy's home."

Comment [mv1]: Is there a way to show or emphasize these feelings more than explicitly saying them? This is the first chance to grab the readers attention. Don't be afraid of using more elevated language for the reader, it will only aid the storytelling.

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Comment [mv2]: Vague word choice. Give this description life by allowing the reader to really see the leaves.

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Comment [mv3]: This feels like an unnecessary explanation, as it is implied through description. Please consider cutting.

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Deleted: Some teenagers hate babysitting younger brothers and sisters. Not me.

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Comment [mv4]: Awkward phrasing, please re-work for clarity.

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I squeeze her hand, swinging it back and forth, high and crazy. Meg breaks into a pile of giggles. Sundays are my best day too, for that exact same reason. Mom is home.

Comment [mv5]: Show me, this is vague and confusing, let's see this interaction play out.

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Me starting high school triggered Mom into finishing her GED. The high test scores she racked up excited her enough to sign up for a couple of classes at the community college. She still works her regular job at St. Vincent de Paul, but added Saturdays at 7-Eleven just to pay tuition.

Meg and I kick our way through crunchy, dry leaves on the trek to our apartment. It's really Darren's place, Mom's boyfriend. We've lived with him for almost two years, which is a whole year longer than we've ever lived anywhere else.

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Meg lets go of my hand and races toward a clump of maple trees sporting brightly colored crowns, spreading their arms over our heads like umbrellas. No matter what the season, or how crummy the weather, this is always our favorite spot on the trek home from school.

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Meg reaches down, grabs a leaf, and holds it up for me to see. "Look! It's giant!"

I dig through a pile of leaves spilling over the plain gray of the sidewalk. "They're like fire, all crackly and warm and bright."

Meg and I gather up an array of the biggest and most colorful leaves we can find, fanning them out in our hands, I hold them across my face, cock my head to the side, and peek over the top. "Princess Megan," I say in a high squeaky voice, "are you having a very fine day?"

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Meg sticks out her hip and stands akimbo, fanning herself with her leaves. "A very fine day, Queen Mattie. An extra-specially fine day."

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We giggle and laugh and pretend while we tromp the rest of the way home. Having a baby sister is the best. I get to color pictures, build sand castles, and go to tea parties. I can play

Comment [mv6]: Confusing listing arrangement, please reorganize for clarity.

Comment [mv7]: Is there a better way to phrase this, or give the sentence more feeling?

Candy Land and Go Fish all day while Mom works, without worrying about homework, or money, or a college scholarship. When I'm with Meg, I'm young, I'm happy.

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Our neighborhood is in the north part of Eugene, a string of older apartments just off a busy street. It's not a place with a cute little playground, or surrounded by wide green lawns and attractive landscaping. The apartment building is functional, with a roof, doors that lock, and living room windows looking out over the parking lot.

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The inside of Darren's apartment is as plain and simple as the outside. White walls. White blinds on the windows. Faded tan carpet in the mini living room and two small bedrooms. Mom gave Darren's apartment a bit of style, though, with pictures, plants, and little things to brighten up the place.

Comment [mv8]: Awkward sounding, please rearrange or rephrase for clarity. This might be better more fully fleshed out in description.

Mom is in our mini kitchen cooking spaghetti. "Hey." She gives Meg a hug and grins at me. "Have fun in the park?"

Meg looks like Mom, the same pale skin and dark blue eyes. My dad was part black. I don't look like I, even belong in the same family. Some people are rude and ask Mom if I'm adopted, and when she says no, they want to know what my dad looked like. Those same people never ask about Meg's dad.

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- Comment [mv9]: What is the significance of this? Be bold. Put some emotion into how this affects her.

Mostly, I envy Mom and Meg's hair. It is a soft, light brown with hints of blonde peeking through, plus it's long, straight, and shiny. Hair I would love to have. Mine is a dark mass of curls I can't manage no matter how hard I try.

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I grab a spoon and dip it into the tomato sauce. "We *always* have fun at the park, Mom." The sauce is so hot I have to blow on it before I can put it into my mouth. Mom is a great cook. She makes meals out of just about anything. When money is short, Mom takes us to the food bank and loads up on whatever they're giving away. Sometimes it's foods we've never tasted,

like turnips or kale. That doesn't stop Mom from taking it home, looking up a recipe, and making something out of it. She doesn't waste anything.

Mom snatches the spoon out of my hand and waves us out of the kitchen. "Go. Finish your homework. Darren said he'd be home by six."

Darren's not my dad, and he's not Meg's. Mom dated him for six months before she agreed to move into his apartment. Darren's halfway decent to us when Mom's around, but when she's gone, he ignores us as if Meg and I are part of the furnishings, like a table or chair, Obstacles in his way. We don't complain, though. Living with him would be worse if he hassled us all the time.

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Our bedroom is small, with a low bookcase separating twin beds. A dresser sits near the door, and one small closet holds the rest of our clothes, shoes, toys, and any other junk we need to stash. Sharing space with Meg doesn't bother me. It's comforting to have her sleeping so close that I can reach out and almost touch her.

Comment [mv10]: Please shorten this, or make this more concise for the reader, so that it reflects the crispness of the rest of the sentence.
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Meg goes directly to her favorite toy, which is the dollhouse she got from Santa. Mom found it at St. Vinnie's, cleaned it up, and bought her a couple of inexpensive dolls and little furniture to go with it. Meg loves it, playing with it for hours at a time.

Comment [mv11]: Word choice might be unclear to reader.
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I flop on my bed and sort through my homework. My goal is a college scholarship. So far, perfect grades haven't been a problem, but high school is way harder than middle school, and the stakes are a whole lot higher. One little B+ and I could end up waiting tables at an all-night truck stop for the rest of my life.

Comment [mv12]: "my goal" feels like an odd transition. Please elaborate or make the statement more of a human thought.

At six, Mom calls us back to the kitchen. Darren expects Mom to have dinner ready when he gets home, even on days when she's working a full shift. He never cleans the apartment, shops for groceries, or does the laundry. Sometimes I get disgusted at Mom for letting Darren

Comment [mv13]: Does this give the wrong impression? Is there a better way to phrase this to clarify that this idea is only in her head and not a stated fact?

Comment [mv14]: Rephrase. Let the reader really feel the narrators feelings on this.

use us like we're his own personal maid service. Mom says he pays the rent and utilities, which is huge. She says most men she knows don't cook, clean, or help in the house. I say Darren's getting off way too easy.

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Moved (insertion) [1]

We putter around, getting dinner ready to eat. Meg gets the garlic bread and sets it on the table while I grab salad dressings out of the refrigerator. Mom drains the spaghetti and dumps it in a bowl.

Moved up [1]: We putter around, getting dinner ready to eat.

I'm starving, so I plop into my chair hoping Mom lets us start without Darren. Meg does the same. Mom pulls out her phone and fires off a text. We wait.

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By now, it's almost six-thirty. "Can we eat, Mom?" I say. "The spaghetti's getting cold."

Mom repeats herself. "Darren said he'd be home by six."

Darren makes a lot of promises he doesn't keep. Quitting drinking or saving his money so he can take classes and get his contracting license are just the beginning of the list.

"Mommy?" says Meg. "Can we start? Please?"

Mom's parents were druggies and neglected her so badly the state took her away when she was eight. After that, she drifted through foster care until she got pregnant with me. Some of her foster homes were decent and treated her well, but others were not. None of them were stable or permanent. I get why Mom wants the four of us to live like a sweet little family, even if only for a Sunday night dinner of spaghetti and garlic bread. The disappointment written on her face makes my heart hurt.

Comment [mv15]: This is very vague. Can the word choice be more specific? Druggies is not a word a modern teen would use. Let's hear the story.

Seconds tick off the kitchen clock before she finally says, "Okay. Let's eat."

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Meg and I dive in, but Mom spends most of the meal twirling spaghetti around on her plate.

Chapter Two

“Rita! Open up the damn door.” Darren beats on the door, waking us up at midnight.

This isn’t the first time I’ve been woken up in the night. Neighbors come home late or drink too much, forgetting some of us have to go to school or work in the morning. Family problems boil to the surface when the rest of us are tired and just want to sleep. Sometimes the red and blue lights of police cars flash through our bedroom window. At least the lights tell me the cops are here so everything will get sorted out and I can go back to sleep.

He pounds and pounds until Mom gets up and lets him in. The neighbor beside us bangs on the wall next to my bed.

Meg whispers, “Mattie?” Her voice quivers, “Is Darren drunk?”

I crawl out of bed and slide in beside her. “Yeah. Sounds like it.”

Mom tries to keep her voice down, but Darren doesn’t make any attempt to be quiet. This isn’t the first fight we’ve witnessed in person or through our bedroom wall, but that doesn’t make it any easier. Meg puts her hands over her ears. I hug her close and wonder why Mom stays with him.

Moved (insertion) [2]

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Moved up [2]: “Rita! Open up the damn door.”

Moved down [3]: He pounds and pounds until Mom gets up and lets him in.

The neighbor beside us bangs on the wall next to my bed.

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Comment [mv16]: Vague description. There could be stronger word choice so the reader has a better idea of what this means.

Moved (insertion) [3]

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Comment [mv17]: Lengthy. Could this be shortened for a more concise sentence. It will be more impactful for the reader.

Comment [mv18]: Explain this to the reader. What’s the real thought of the narrator in this moment?

Angry words pound at the walls of our apartment. Part of me wants to listen and try to make sense out of all the ugly details. The other part of me tries to shut out their voices, or at least pretend it's the wife-beater next door and not my own mother fighting with her boyfriend.

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Their voices stop, but the silence is scari, I hold my breath, listening to the struggle of bodies, the grunts, and moans, Mom cries out and furniture crashes. Meg and I jerk upright, but Meg doesn't sit in bed like me, staring at the wall. She pushes out of my arms and flies for the door. I throw myself out of bed and take off after her.

Comment [mv19]: This feels repetitive, as the reader already knows this from the narrative. Consider cutting.

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Comment [mv20]: Word choice. Make the reader feel this. What is the narrator thinking and feeling?

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Meg flings open the door to our room and runs down the hall. I grab her before she dives into the middle of Mom and Darren's fight. Meg struggles in my arms, but I pull her close.

Comment [mv21]: Is there a way to tighten this action and really help the reader feel in the moment?

Only the hall light and the small one over the kitchen stove are on. One of the kitchen chairs lays broken on the floor. The others are shoved to the side. Mom leans against the kitchen table with Darren hovering over her.

Comment [mv22]: Is there a tighter description for this? It sounds awkward.

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"Don't you get it, Rita?" He sneers right in her face. "You just ain't smart enough."

Comment [mv23]: Is there a better phrasing for this? Show the reader so that we really feel him in her face.

He backs away, giving me a good look at Mom. Her hair is a mass of tangles. Blood trickles from her nose and the corner of her mouth. The side of her face is red and splotchy. My stomach rolls, sending acid shooting up the back of my throat.

Comment [mv24]: Maybe something more complex, given the rest of the paragraph, so as to match style. Something like, "exposing her to the light"?

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Meg screams, "Mommy!"

Every muscle I own quivers, then tightens until my body turns rigid. My eyes and mouth and face scrunch up so much my teeth hurt from the pressure. I've never seen Mom hurt. Ever.

She and Darren have had fights before but never like this. Never this physical.

Comment [mv25]: How can we show this instead of just saying it? Explore her emotions. This thought feels emotionally distant.

Darren tips a can of beer to his lips. He isn't supposed to bring alcohol into the house. He promised he wouldn't drink at all, but that promise didn't last long. He says drinking is the only

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way he can hang out with his friends. What was the big deal? It's just one beer. Now, he doesn't even bother to explain why he's drunk and six hours late.

Comment [mv26]: Is this a quote, or is this internal? It feels confusing and out of place. Consider cutting.

Darren gulps down the rest of the beer and squeezes, crushing it in his fist. "You got these high-minded plans, Rita, like you're better than the rest of us. But you just don't get it." He holds the crushed can in front of her face. "College ain't nothin' but a big waste of your money."

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He throws the empty can against the wall and turns back to Mom. His lip curls, "You're just too dumb to know it." Thrusting the flat of his hand against her chest, he shoves her so hard she stumbles backward. The table she's leaning on slides across the floor, knocking over two kitchen chairs.

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Meg cries out, jerking against my arms. Anger sends heat shooting through my nerves, making my muscles twitch with tension. My fingers itch to rip every limb from his body and scratch his face into bloody gashes. The need to hurt Darren is so strong I can hardly hold myself back, but my job is Meg. I hang on tight and turn all my anger into hating him.

Comment [mv27]: Be more specific. Let's see her feelings in this moment.

Darren wheels around. "What are you brats staring at?"

We've shared Mom with Darren for two and a half years. I resent him for that. I look him in the eye and say, "You worthless piece of trash."

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Darren stalks across the room. He leans toward me until I choke at the smell of beer on his breath. I glare right back at him and refuse to show him one tiny bit of fear. Without a word, he puts his hands on my shoulders and shoves, sending Meg and me stumbling backwards and landing against the arm of the couch.

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Mom leaps at him, screaming, "Don't touch my kids!" She gropes for a lamp on the end table like she's going to throw it, but Darren is already out the door.

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I let go of Meg and she races across the room, burying her face against Mom's chest.

Sinking back against the wall, Mom hugs her with one arm, pressing her other hand flat against the side of her face. "Are you hurt, baby," she whispers. "Are you and Mattie hurt?"

"We're okay, Mom." I step forward, afraid to know just how bad Darren beat her. "Are you okay?" She turns away, hiding behind her hair.

"Mom?" I step closer, reach over, and pull her hand away. The pale skin around her eyes is bruised and already turning purple and puffy. I take a deep breath and try to keep my voice from shaking. "You need ice, Mom."

"Get garbage bags, Mattie." Her words come out garbled, slurred together from pain and swelling. "Pack your clothes and Meg's. Only what you need." She takes a deep ragged breath. "All your blankets, baby."

"Mommy," wails Meg. "What's happening, Mommy?"

Mom gently pushes her away. "Go with Mattie, sweetie. Help her pack."

I race to the kitchen and jerk a box of garbage bags out from under the sink, peeling off the last of the roll. I grab a sandwich bag out of the drawer, run over to the freezer, and dump in a bunch of ice. Meg clutches at Mom, but I pull her away and hand Mom the ice.

I steer Meg into our bedroom and waste valuable seconds standing in the middle of the room, wondering where to start. Clothes. I jerk open a dresser drawer. "Hold the bag, Meg." I sort through Meg's underwear and socks, t-shirts and jeans trying to pick out what we'll need. When the bag is full, I tie the top shut and grab another one. Sorting takes too long, so I stuff in anything I can grab, cramming Meg's dresses into a bag with my jeans and sweaters.

Mom comes in and grabs the first two bags. "Hurry, girls. Grab your blankets."

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Meg scoops up her stuffed animals and jams them into a bag with her pajamas. I glance around the room. Drawers hang half out of the dresser with dribbles of clothes draped over their sides. The closet door stands open. Hangers litter the floor, jumbled together with old toys and beat up tennis shoes. My books sit in perfect rows on our one little bookshelf. Fantasy. Classics. Trashy romances. All mine. All carefully collected. The roll of garbage bags is gone.

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Mom sticks her head in the door. "Girls!"

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Meg and I throw on our backpacks. I hand Meg the pillows, scoop blankets off our beds, and push Meg toward the door. We hurry out of the apartment and Darren is standing on the sidewalk with a can of beer in one hand, a whole six-pack in the other.

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He laughs when he sees us. "Where you going?"

Darren's right. Where are we going? It's the middle of the night. The sky is black, the air misty and cold. The rest of the apartments are dark, so quiet they could be empty. Despair hangs over the whole building like a dark shroud.

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Mom turns away from the man she's shared her life and family with, and herds us toward Ruby, our beat up old station wagon.

Darren reaches out and grabs Mom by the arm, spinning her around. "I said where you think you're going?"

Mom jerks her arm away. "You shoved my kids." She leans in and glares. "You knew when I moved in that I don't live with druggies, or drunks, or abusers." She pulls back. "And I sure don't live with guys who knock my kids around."

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Darren swings around and throws his can of beer against the wall of the apartment building. It hits with a splat, sending a spray of beer streaming down the siding. Using the garbage bags in her hands Mom pushes Meg and me toward Ruby. I stuff our blankets and bags

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in the back, wondering where we're going. It's the middle of the night. Can we find a motel? A room? Are places open this late?

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- Comment [mv28]: Feels unnecessary. Consider cutting.
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Mom slides in behind the wheel. I shove plastic garbage bags out of the way, settle Meg into the back seat, and jump into the front. Mom starts the car and backs out of her parking spot. We drive away from Darren's apartment, away from our life of nearly two years. Where do we go from here?

Mom leans forward, clutches the wheel with both hands, and drives extra slow. The streets in our neighborhood are dark and lonely. No one is out walking the dog in the middle of the night. No one is driving to the store for milk. The whole world feels like it is lost or destroyed, with Mom, Meg, and me the only survivors, cocooned in rusty old Suby Ruby.

- Comment [mv29]: Flesh out this feeling of total darkness and feeling alone. This will give Mattie a stronger internal voice.

The windshield wipers flick back and forth, clearing away the mist. Mom drives to Beltline and takes the eastbound on-ramp. A few cars cruise by, their headlights brightening our way. She drives a couple of miles before turning south into a quiet neighborhood with tall trees and wide front lawns. I wonder what she's doing. We don't know anyone who lives here and there aren't motels where we could get a room for the night. When Mom parks Ruby beside a clump of trees near a small park, I get it. We're sleeping in the car. No bed. No bathroom. Just the three of us, camping out on the street, hoping to survive the night.

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I lean toward Mom and whisper. "Can't we get a motel?"

Mom shakes her head. "They're too expensive, plus, we'll only be out here a few hours."

Meg is so tired she doesn't question why we shove garbage bags around and fold the back seat flat to make a bed. Mom and I spread out the blankets without saying a word. She takes Meg over to the bushes to go to the bathroom. I should go too, but I'm not about to bare my butt this close to civilization.

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Meg and I crawl into our makeshift bed. Mom covers us with quilts before she slides into the driver's seat and pulls a blanket around her shoulders. I wrap my arms around my baby sister, and hold her until her breath settles into a slow, steady rhythm. It's only then that I hear Mom crying into her pillow.

I should comfort her. Pat her shoulder, tell her we'll be all right, but all I can do is stare into the dark. How safe is it for girls to sleep in a car, anyway? Mom locked the doors, but women joggers get nabbed even in daylight. We're out here in the middle of the night, where creeps could be lurking behind the bushes, or around a corner, ready to pounce on us, their next victims.

Fear gnaws at me, eating up my self-control. Do predators sniff out their victims, like lions stalking the weakest in the herd? Do they know where to look, and when their prey is most vulnerable? Even protected by Ruby's sturdy body, sleeping in the car makes us easy pickings for any scumbag that happens along.

Somehow I fall asleep, only knowing it when a garbage truck rumbles by and wakes me to the early gray of morning. I close my eyes, take in a long, deep breath, and blow it out, slow and steady. We survived.

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Comment [mv30]: This section feels long and repetitive. Is there a way to let the reader in on the narrator's feelings and emotions?

Chapter Three

Mom drives us to one of those all-night gas stations near the freeway. The three of us race to the bathroom past truckers paying for fill-ups and fists full of Twinkies. Mom takes Meg in one stall and I almost jerk the door off another in my hurry to get my jeans down and go.

We clean up in the grime of the gas station. Yellow lights over the dirty mirror turn my skin a dull, sickish shade of brown. I dab at my face with a wet paper towel. Mom says my skin is my best feature. I try to believe her, but I've spent my life as one of the only black kids in an entire school, so I can't help feeling different.

My hair sticks out in a halo of dark frizz, but my hairbrush is back at Darren's apartment. Mom has a comb in her backpack, but combs are for soft, straight hair like Meg and Mom's. Not masses of curls like mine. I hunt through the junk in the bottom of my backpack until I find a rubber band and gather my hair into a clump on the back of my head. While Mom goes out to the car to get us clean underwear, I pull the comb gently through Meg's hair, wishing mine were half as shiny and smooth as hers.

Meg studies me in the mirror over the sink. "I hope Mommy gets us a real house." A smile tilts up the corners of her mouth. "One that has a yard so I can play right outside our door

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Comment [mv31]: I really love these descriptions. They give immediacy and thoughtfulness. This is what I feel like I'm looking more for out of the text. I think you could expand

Comment [mv32]: Sounds clunky. Please rephrase for clarity.

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and we can have a dog, and cat, and gerbil, maybe even a bunny. I really, really, really want a pet bunny. I really, really do.”

The hope in Meg’s eyes hits me so hard I have to turn away to keep from bursting into tears. I know that dream of the three of us in our own house, the white picket fence, and the dog, the cat, the gerbil. It’s my dream too, but somewhere along the way I traded in fairytale castles for goals big enough to get me someplace. Otherwise, I’ll end up like Mom, digging milk money out of the cushions of a dumpy old sofa.

Meg and I munch on an apple and crackers we dip into a jar of peanut butter, while Mom drives us across town. Meg’s school starts before mine, so we go there first.

Mom parks next to the curb in her usual drop off spot. Meg leans across the back of the seat to give us goodbye kisses, before she hops out and yells, “Bye, Mommy. Bye, Mattie.”

Mom and I sit in Ruby and watch Meg walk toward the front door with her pink polka-dot pack bumping against her back. She spent half the night sleeping in a car, yet she marches off to school like any ordinary day.

Columbia High School sits on a side street in north Eugene, not far from Meg’s school. A one-story brick building, it sprawls back from the road with the gym and auditorium poking their heads up on one side. I hop out, grab my pack, and walk to the door past huge evergreens standing tall and straight like living sentinels.

It’s my second high school. The first was across town, and you wouldn’t think moving to a different school in the same town would be traumatic, but it was. By the time I walked into Columbia High, halfway through freshman year, the cliques were well-established. Any friends I made were new kids like me. I walk through the door and tighten my grip on the strap of my pack.

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Comment [mv33]: Be wary of pushing this theme, as this is something that doesn’t just happen to uneducated people.

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Comment [mv34]: Stronger word choice. Lets see these.

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Sleeping in my jeans brings a whole new paranoia to showing up at school. In middle school and high school, clothes become this super big deal, especially for girls. If you show up in baggy jeans when the style is ultra tight you'll be labeled a freak, and sharks will attack, ripping you to shreds before you can even scream for help.

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I guess it works the same way for guys too. If a boy wore khaki pants pulled past his belly button, a dress shirt all tucked in neat and tidy, and anything but flip flops or tennis shoes, he'd probably get beaten up in the boy's locker room.

Comment [mv35]: This might not be the metaphor that best fits this description. Consider cutting or rephrasing to reflect her true feelings so that it is more impactful for readers.

I weave my way through the halls and do nothing but worry. Do I stink? I hate that. Some kids smell, and no matter how nice they are, you just don't want to be around them. It's Monday, so at least nobody knows that my jeans and t-shirt are the same ones I wore yesterday.

A tall, gangly guy lounges against my locker, playing games on his phone. I can't squeeze behind him, because the girl in the locker next to me has her boyfriend crawling all over her. I didn't get my morning shower, I'm grumpy from lack of sleep, and I've got a Spanish test hanging over my head like a hammer. I'm in no mood to mess around.

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Comment [mv36]: Stronger word choice. Let the reader see and feel this.

I glare at the guy filling up my space. "That's my locker."

Avoiding boys is the first rung on my climb to the top. Maybe at twenty-five I'll start looking around, but the guy has to have prospects. Education. Money. He's got to be calm, loving, and stable. All the qualities Mom searches for in a man, but never seems to find.

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Clear blue eyes flick at me for one nanosecond, before going back to his game. I scowl. "I said that's my locker. What I meant was get out of the way. Please."

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A grin tips up the corners of his mouth. When he lifts his head, he looks full at me, his thumb makes a dramatic tap on the screen. Sandy blonde hair spills over his forehead with a casual messiness that frames his face. He's handsome. Crazy handsome. But there are loads of

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boys with such perfect looks your body melts, and your breath hangs up in your throat. It's how
they act that counts.

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Comment [mv37]: This sounds vague. Consider rephrasing or cutting for clarity.

He shoves his phone into the pocket of his jeans, but he doesn't get out of the way.

Instead, he folds his long arms across his chest and keeps looking at me. I tilt my head to the
side, raising my eyebrows.

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His smile spreads. "You're kinda cute."

Sighing, I roll my eyes. "And you're kinda in the way."

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He still doesn't move, smiling.

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I narrow my eyes, and my voice takes on this razor-sharp edge that's guaranteed to
squelch any male ego between the ages of two and two hundred. "I've got class. Now move."

Comment [mv38]: Please simplify this for clarity and readability.

He peels his body off the front of my locker and steps to the side, just far enough for me
to squeeze in. His body moves in long, fluid motions, easy and loose. He's tall, basketball
scholarship kind of tall. "Where's your class?" he asks.

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I ignore how close he stands and step up next to him. "Nowhere you need to be."

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I open my locker, stuff in my algebra book, and pull out my English. Shifting his body so
he can rest his shoulder against the locker next to mine, he studies me.

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Most girl's eyes would sparkle with excitement and anticipation. They would smile and
flirt, hoping to impress him enough to snag a date to the next dance, or even walk to class with
him. Maybe it's because I spent half the night sleeping in a car, terrified. Maybe it's that I don't
like being the focus of anybody's attention. The real reason is that I won't let myself waste
energy and time on boys. Not now, maybe not ever.

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His whole body jerks back, as I slam my locker door and take off for class, as if he didn't
expect me to walk away.

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I keep moving, and with three quick strides falls in step beside me. “I creeped you out, didn’t I?” I don’t look at him. “That was supposed to be me flirting.”

Deleted: . He slaps the guy making out with his girlfriend and says, “Later.”

He leans down, peering into my face. “Instead I was cocky. Arrogant. Bigheaded.”

Comment [mv39]: This is an odd sounding directional, please rephrase or consider cutting.

“Conceited,” I add without giving him a glance.

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“Brash. Smug.”

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“Revolting,” I throw at him.

“Revolting? Oh, man. Was I that bad?”

He wants me to smile. To say some cute, nonsense thing that lets him off the hook. Girls do it all the time. Smart girls. Going places girls. Girls of every shape and size. Not me. I extend my stride and keep right on walking, but his long legs keep up.

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“I’m sorry. I really am.” He pauses, waiting for me to respond. “It was stupid of me to come on like that.”

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I don’t say a word, but he keeps pushing. “I’m Jack.”

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Now I’m supposed to giggle, smile, and tell him my name, the whole boy meets girl game. I don’t give out my name to just anybody. My name means too much to have people tossing it around without thinking how I feel, or who I am. I turn into my classroom without giving him a glance.

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I’m halfway across the room when he yells, “And you’re not just kinda cute. You’re really cute.”

I spin around, rooted to the floor with my eyes wide, my mouth hanging open. Jack rests both hands high on the doorframe and leans into the room. His blue eyes twinkle and the grin on his face spreads to his ears. Twitters of laughter erupt from the class. I turn away, stomp down the aisle, and throw myself into my desk. I could rip off his head.

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Comment [mv40]: She sees this from how far away she is?

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Class starts and I don't give the locker guy one second of my time. At noon, I stand in the cafeteria line to get my free and reduced lunch. That's another part of high school that's hard. All the kids with a shred of extra cash eat off campus. That leaves we poor unfortunates, who can't afford McDonalds everyday of our lives, waiting in line for rubbery hamburgers and slimy hot dogs.

Comment [mv41]: Unless this is explained or shown, please cut in order to separate timeline.

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My friend, Lilly, sits at a table with her boyfriend, Tanner. She waves, and I wave back. Lilly and I came to Columbia High at the same time, so we got to be friends. We used to eat lunch together and hang out once in awhile after school; we even went to a couple of movies and school plays together. Then Tanner asked her out, and that was the end of Lilly and me. We're still friends, but we only talk when we've got a class together, or text each other once in awhile.

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Comment [mv42]: Word choice feels repetitive. Reconsider.

I take my tray to a table, plop down, and prop open my algebra book. High school would be a lot more fun if I had more friends. It's not that I don't like people, or can't make friends. It's just that every time I make a connection, something happens. Lilly falls in love with Tanner. Or my friend, Finn, starts smoking weed and hanging out with a bunch of druggies until his mom packs him off to live with his dad. Life just seems to get in the way.

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Comment [mv43]: This feels out of place. Maybe use a more concise example so as to match Lilly. Also, "bunch of druggies" does not feel like the voice of a teenager. Be more specific.

I've only gotten one problem done when Jack slides in across from me. He's got a Burger King bag in his hand and a grin on his face that just won't quit. I ignore him and go back to my homework. He reaches over and flips up the cover of my notebook so he can read my name.

Comment [mv44]: Integrate this into the sentence

"Mattie Rollins." He says it soft and slow. As if he's digesting it. Memorizing it. He extends his hand across the table. It's so big he could pick up a basketball without straining. "Hi, Mattie Rollins."

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Comment [mv45]: Stronger word choice

Comment [mv46]: Is there a way to integrate this into the previous sentence?

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He's got a calm, easy grace about him, totally comfortable in his skin. He leaves his hand hanging between us, as if he expects me to change my mind, give in, and shake it. I jerk my eyes back to my math book. When he finally pulls it away, I can't keep my eyes from glancing up. His face is vulnerable, so open, my heart cramps up and bangs around in my chest before it steadies.

"Look," I say, "I'll be polite and nice and lay it out straight." I zero in on him so he knows I'm not some sweet, wishy-washy chick who says one thing, but means something different. "You're wasting your time."

His eyebrows squeeze together so much they wrinkle up his whole forehead. "You've got a boyfriend?"

I shake my head. "No. It's not that." I try to think of the right words, but my brain is too jumbled. I blurt out the truth. "I've got goals. So I'm not getting sidetracked by some super cute guy with shiny white teeth."

Jack bursts out laughing. He jets the sound flow up through his body and out into the universe, like he doesn't care if the whole wide world knows he's happy. I glance around, aware that the entire school cafeteria is now taking a sudden interest in my life.

Jack keeps grinning while he unpacks his lunch. Two double Whoppers. A huge order of fries. A cup of soda so giant I'd need two hands to lift it. I nibble on my free mac and cheese while he mows through his first Whopper.

He unwraps the second sandwich, takes a bite, and looks at me across the table. "Fair enough, Mattie Rollins."

He doesn't say another word all the way through the Whopper, so I figure he got the hint and I'm done with him.

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- Moved down [4]: I jerk my eyes back to my math book.
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- Comment [mv47]: This sentence is a tad long, please rephrase for an easier read.

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- Comment [mv48]: Show this awkward moment. Lets make the reader cringe like Mattie.

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“But it’s my time.” He takes a long slurp on his soda and pops a couple of fries in his mouth. “And I don’t think I’m wasting it.”

What do I say? Get lost? I already said that, and he didn’t seem to get the hint. Before I get another word out of my mouth, Jack points at my lunch tray. “Are you going to eat that?”

I glance down at the brown glob of chocolate pudding piled in the corner of my tray and wrinkle my nose. “Seriously?”

He gives me that Oscar-winning smile. “Seriously. I love that stuff.”

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Comment [mv49]: Cliché. Please cut, or rephrase for sincerity.

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Chapter Four

“Mattie Rollins,” crackles the intercom over Mr. Zaponski’s desk. “Report to the office to be checked out.”

Tension drops out of my shoulders ~~and my muscles relax, relief overflowing my chest,~~ Mom must have found us an apartment. She’s calling me out of sixth period so Meg and I can get settled before she heads off to work. I slide between the girls in the alto section of the choir, step off the riser, and gather up my backpack. Mr. Z hands me a pass ~~and I~~ practically skip to the office.

Mom is waiting near the door. She’s standing in the shadow of a trophy case, which doesn’t do anything to disguise the blue and purple bruises on her face. I scribble my name on the sign out sheet and follow her out of the building.

“Is the apartment close? Can Meg and I walk to school, or do we have to take the bus?”

Mom takes off for the door without answering me. That’s how I know we’re still homeless and sleeping in a car. I don’t catch up with her until we’re outside tromping through the rain.

“You tried didn’t you?” My words come out loud and harsh, but I’m too cranked up to care. “You didn’t just go off to class and forget about us?”

Mom should slap me. She doesn’t deserve purple bruises, split lips, or Darren’s bullying.

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But she never hits. No matter how sassy and snotty I get, or how tired and cranky she is, she never turns mean or abusive.

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Mom stops in the middle of the sidewalk. “I skipped classes, pounded on doors, and begged apartment managers to take us.” Mom holds her arms stiff by her sides, clenching her hands into fists.

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“Can’t we get a motel?” I say. “Just for the night?” I know I’m acting like a whiny little brat, but once I get sassy it’s hard to rein myself in.

Comment [mv50]: This sounds unnatural. Consider cutting, otherwise rephrase to better encompass her actions and her awareness.

“No.” Mom takes off across the parking lot. “We need first and last month’s rent, plus a cleaning deposit. A motel is too expensive.”

I’m so focused on Mom finding us a room with a door and bathroom that I walk right through a rain puddle and don’t even feel my tennis shoes turning wet until I squish out the other side. “What about your friends, Carly or Jen? Did you ask them? One of them would let us crash on their couch for a couple of days, just ‘til we found something.”

Comment [mv51]: Awkward, confusing for the reader.

Mom shakes her head. “Carly’s brother and two kids just moved in. That’s seven in a tiny two bedroom.”

She stops next to Ruby and opens the driver’s side door. “And Jen’s husband beats her up all the time. She’s finally taking the kids and moving to Portland to live with her mother.”

We stare at each other across Ruby’s roof. “I’ll make more calls, but I can’t promise anything. Not for tonight anyway.”

Meg hops up and down on the back seat. “We’re going to the library, Mattie, and we can read books, and do our homework, and it will be really, really fun!”

Comment [mv52]: Are the lack of commas in Meg’s dialogue intentional?

I paste a smile across my face and bat away the worry ripping holes in my gut. We made it through one night on the street, but can we be safe for two? Is that tempting fate? Dropping our

odds of survival?

Mom slides into the driver's seat, clutching the steering wheel so hard her hands look like claws. "The library was the only place I could think of where you would be safe." She tilts her head toward a plastic bag on the console between us. "I made sandwiches."

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Comment [mv53]: Sounds awkward, rephrase or try to integrate this description into the sentence.

I pick up the plastic bag. Two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches along with a baggie of those little carrots. I hand a sandwich back to Meg, pull out one for myself, and take a bite.

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Ruby splashes through puddles, her windshield wipers whipping back and forth to clear away the drizzle. Rain is just part of living in Oregon. At least in the winter. I love hearing that soft patter of raindrops on the roof, or feeling them plop on my head when I walk outside.

Comment [mv54]: This feels out of place and doesn't further the feeling. Let's see and feel this more.

Deleted: Some people hate the damp and cold, but

It was easy to love rain when I lived in a place where I could make a cup of hot chocolate, curl up with a good book, and spend a lazy evening all warm and dry. Rain takes on a whole new dimension when my home is a car and my tennis shoes are so wet my feet and toes feel like ice cubes.

Comment [mv55]: Make the reader feel this cold, wet experience.

I force myself to chew the glob of peanut butter and jelly in my mouth. We need an apartment. Now. Even a room works, as long as we can get to a bathroom. Scrubbing my armpits with a soggy paper towel worked for one day, but we can't keep it up. I choke down another bite of sandwich.

Mom stops in front of the library. I slide out with my backpack clutched in one hand, peanut butter sandwich in the other. Meg crawls out of her booster seat and stands beside me on the sidewalk.

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"I'll meet you in the children's section as soon as I get off work." Mom leans toward us. "And don't let anyone know you're here alone."

Mom searches my face for a sliver of forgiveness. I should give it to her, but I don't.

Instead, I turn away, guiding Meg to the door of the city library and hours and hours of time to kill. Just like all the other homeless people.

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Comment [mv56]: Let's feel the dread of this sentence.

The downtown library is the nicest place we ever go. It's beautiful. Three stories high with lots of tall windows and bright open spaces. A glassed-in coffee bar with tables and chairs forms an entryway. The checkout desk is inside by the front door and across the entry is a beautiful curved staircase that winds up to the two upper floors. All the wood is a natural light color that makes the place warm and inviting.

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Comment [mv57]: Word choice. Lets see this building.

Comment [mv58]: Use a more descriptive word, otherwise cut.

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We treat the children's section like a second home. When Darren and his buddies were watching football on his big-screen TV, Mom drove us here. Other times just to read and hang out. Once in awhile, if Mom has enough money to splurge, she'll buy us a cup of hot chocolate or a cold drink at the coffee bar.

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Comment [mv59]: Sounds vague, maybe something that will make her smile? What the reaction? Give more life to this sentence.

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Today, I don't scan the low stacks of books, hunting for one Meg will like. I glance around the room, searching for a place where we can spend hours of time without being noticed. I hold Meg's hand, guiding her past small tables scattered near the librarian's desk. In the back corner, I find a couch, a couple of chairs, and a little round table. If we stay quiet and mind our own business, no one will notice we're here without Mom.

Comment [mv60]: Weak word choice, please be more descriptive. Granite? Metal? How big?

Our first two hours whiz by, but as time ticks off the big clock over the librarian's desk the minutes slow to a crawl. We do our homework and I read Meg stories. We take trips to the bathroom, get drinks at the water fountain, and look for new stories to read. As the evening drags on, we get tired, hungry, and worried.

Comment [mv61]: Give the reader this feeling. Maybe a separate sentence?

Meg nestles against me on the couch. "Will Mommy get us a house?"

"I hope so," I whisper. "I sure hope so."

"I miss my doll house, Mattie." Meg speaks so quiet I can barely hear her. "Darren better

not sell it, or give it away, or smash it before we get a house, or I'll be really, really mad.”

The muscles in my chest constrict around my heart and lungs, making it hard for me to breathe. Meg's dollhouse, stuffed animals, my books, and all the other things we owned are probably gone forever. Do I tell her that, or let her go on hoping she'll get her dollhouse back?

Before I can think of what to say, Meg falls asleep with her head on my lap. I gaze down at her and stroke the side of her face. She's so sweet, young, and innocent; she's strong, too. She got tossed into the street, lost most of her toys, and she's still tough enough to fight back.

I ache for Meg, for me, for Mom. Our life wasn't great with Darren, but at least we had a roof and a bathroom. Now all we've got is Ruby. We survived one night on the street, but can we be lucky for two?

Mom hurries into the library at five minutes to nine. By then, Meg and I have gone back to the bathroom, gotten drinks, and are standing near the door. I don't need to ask her if we have a warm, safe place to sleep. The worry in her face tells me all I need to know.

Mom parks in the same neighborhood we stayed last night. I snuggle deep into our pile of quilts, curl my body around Meg's, and hold her tight against me. Reason tells me we aren't the only kids who've spent a couple of nights in a car. It probably happens more than I think, but knowing other kids survive doesn't take away the fear of predators prowling dark, lonely streets.

My mind spins through every horrible thing that could happen to us. The more I try to get control of myself, not to think, the worse the scenes that run through my head.

To stop the fear chewing at whatever pitiful bit of courage I own, I say, “Mom?”

Mom sits in the front seat, reading a textbook by flashlight. “Yeah, honey?”

“Do you wish you were rich?” My question sounds all wrong.

“I mean, what would you do, if you had more money? How would you live? What would

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Comment [mv62]: Consider integrating these descriptions into sentence before.

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Comment [mv63]: How is she fighting back? Maybe use another term, for instance something more in line with her cheerfulness.

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Comment [mv64]: Vague. Describe this fear, let the reader feel this feeling.

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Comment [mv65]: This is confusing, please rephrase for clarity in reading.

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you do with it?”

Mom clicks off her flashlight, sitting, so quiet and still that all I can hear is her breathing. “I’d get us a house, of course. That would be number one. Not big. Not fancy. Just comfortable, with clean, sturdy furniture, in a nice neighborhood, near good schools.”

I’m thinking she’s done, that’s the end of her dreams, when she says, “And then I’d finish college, so I could get a good job and take better care of you and Meg.”

She hesitates again and adds, “But that’s not the only reason I want to go to school. I hate being ignorant, Mattie. I’m embarrassed that I don’t understand words, or the history of our government. People talk about the news and I don’t recognize the countries, or their leaders. I want to know things, Mattie. Be educated.”

The force she throws into her words startles me. We sit wrapped together in the dark, protected by Ruby’s rusty shell.

“What about you?” Mom’s voice settles back to calm and quiet. “What would you do if we had the money?”

I hesitate too, as if this is the most important question I’ll ever answer. “I want the house, the education, the security, but I want to see things, too. Paris. London. New York City.” I breathe in the cool night air. “I want to hike in the mountains. Swim in a warm ocean. See a ballet. Go to an opera. So much, Mom. I want to do so much.”

My mind whirls with possibilities, listing them in no order, as we sit in silence, lost in our own dreams.

“Don’t give up those goals.” Mom’s voice is so soft I can barely hear her. “Hang tight to them.” She leaves the flashlight off, but I don’t hear her put away her textbook, or pull the quilts up around her shoulders.

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Comment [mv66]: Awkward introduction. Is there a way to simplify this thought to the reader?

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Comment [mv67]: How can the reader feels these pauses?

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Comment [mv68]: This feels long, is there a way to tidy or tighten this sentence to again give the feel of the weight of the question at hand.

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I study the rivers of rain gliding down Ruby's windows, tighten my arms, and pull Meg closer. My eyes get heavy and I drift into space. That in-between, where I'm not asleep, but not awake either. My breathing slows, as my body sinks deeper into sleep.

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Crunch. My eyes pop open. I peer into the dark. Crunch. My breath slows to barely a whisper. Crunch. Steps? Someone walking? Rain patters on the roof and muffles sound. I don't move my head, but push the quilts aside far enough to peer over the edge. All I see are dark streaks of rain sliding down Ruby's windows.

Comment [mv69]: Another good example of a tight description that adds suspense.

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I breathe out, slow and steady. I tell myself not to be paranoid. Not everyone is a rapist, killer, or sex offender. Maybe somebody is walking their dog, or coming home late, or taking an evening stroll. The steps come close, so close they are right next to the car. I don't move, don't breathe, don't blink.

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The steps stop. Is someone bent over Ruby, peering in her windows? Do they see us? I can't see them, but I don't move. What if this person is not a dog walker, but a rapist looking for his next victim?

Comment [mv70]: This cuts into the suspense, please consider cutting.

A scream rises in my throat. I press my lips together and lay as still and rigid as stone. Meg sleeps in my arms, but Mom is still awake. I can tell, because she is not making the slightest bit of noise, either. We wait, covered in a blanket of darkness.

The person moves on, the crunch of their steps falling away into the rain. I let out my breath. "Mom?" I whisper.

A soft hiss of air escapes from her lips. "Yeah."

Deleted: Mom's

"I'm scared." The dark hides my fear, and lets me speak words I wouldn't admit in the bright light of day. "I'm so scared."

Comment [mv71]: I like the contrast, but this phrase sounds awkward, is there a way to rephrase this for clarity?

"Me, too, honey. Me, too."

I hear tears in her voice, feel them sinking into her sweatshirt, taste them on my own lips.

My dreams are gone, lost in the reality of Ruby, parked alone and vulnerable on a dark, lonely city street.

My mind spins for hours, or maybe just minutes. Somehow in the damp of the night, I sleep.

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Comment [mv72]: Great ending. Again, a tight description with impact in a small amount of space. More of this.