

The End

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Tragedy can either draw people together, or push them apart...

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~ The End ~ Becky Patterson sat in the dimly lit room, her head bowed slightly, staring blankly into space. She neither knew nor cared how long she'd been there. Finally she heard a light rap on the door, which opened before she could respond. "Excuse me, Ms. Patterson? Everything appears to be in order, and we need to — time is of the essence —" "Of course," she said in a flat whisper, not making eye contact, then as an afterthought added, "What are you taking?" Hesitation hung in the air for a few seconds before the reply came: "Skin...we have a burn victim who needs a graft." She nodded, ruminating numbly about the good the donation would do. "It's the right thing to do, it will help someone," she said to no one in particular, her voice the same dull monotone. Several minutes passed as she remained motionless in the chair. She wasn't thinking of what was about to occur, but of the better life it would bring, and the knowledge had made the decision an easy one. It brought her comfort, even a measure of contentment, to facilitate benefiting a fellow human to such a degree. "Ms. Patterson? I'm sorry, but..." "Oh...yes..." Getting to her feet, she took the three steps to the center of the small room, thankful it wasn't any further. As it was, she had to grasp the bed rail to steady herself. The nurse standing opposite her paused with his hands at the top of the sheet. "May I?" Becky could only nod. He gingerly folded it down to expose the serene features beneath. She started to reach out, then pulled back. "It's okay," he reassured her. Gently touching the hair, she found her voice. "It's time for me to say goodbye now. You go take care of people, like you always do. We'll be all right." The words caught, but she needed to finish, she needed to say more. She closed her eyes, now acutely feeling how swollen and sore they were, and swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. "I love you, Mom." * If anything, this part of it was even worse than sitting in the tiny hospital room with her mother's body, Becky thought. She had done everything possible: notify her father, sister, brother and aunt; contact the mortuary; fill out all the legal forms put in front of her; even speak with her parents' life insurance agent. Now all that was left was waiting — for the roads to reopen, for someone (anyone) to arrive, for the stupor inside her to subside and the tears to return —

waiting...and replaying the horror of the morning over and over again. To distract herself, she switched on the television set in the hospital's appropriately named Family Waiting Room. "...yes, Joyce, conditions are treacherous out here and the state police are asking people to stay put if at all possible." "Thanks, Jim. You be careful making your way back to the station." The newscaster turned to a different camera. "If you're just joining our special coverage, we are reporting on today's sudden and deadly early season ice storm blanketing the region. Most roads have been closed and there are numerous accidents, including one fatality..." Becky clicked off the TV. One fatality. She flipped through the magazines absently, checked her cell phone for text messages out of habit, and finally stood up and began to pace. One fatality. Why did it have to be her mother, why did it have to be the day she had arrived for a visit, why had she changed the date so she could attend that stupid conference last week? A week ago it had been sunny and 60 degrees, but today... With each step, she berated herself and found more reasons to feel responsible for the tragedy. During one of her circuits in the cramped space, she caught a glimpse of the state trooper who had just entered the room. She hurtled toward him, the quiet stoicism of the past few hours instantly replaced by a torrent of the raw emotion that had nearly overwhelmed her earlier. She threw herself against him, and uncharacteristically, her words came in a flood. "Oh my God, I'm so glad you're here! I knew you'd get through, but my God, how far did you have to drive in this? It must have been horrible. I can't believe how fast this storm swept in, can you? Oh my God, it just happened so fast, and the ice is so thick. I've never seen it like this, and, oh God, it was awful, it was awful, awful..." Sobbing, she collapsed into him. He held her tightly, allowing the bawling to diminish before he spoke. "I wasn't about to make my big sis sit here alone any longer than absolutely necessary." "Neither was I," came a voice from the doorway. "Alexandra! I told you I'd come get you as soon as I checked on Becky," said the trooper. "Yeah, well, I didn't want to wait, Thomas," she said tersely, barely pausing to give him a perfunctory hug before focusing on their sister and pulling her into a heartfelt embrace. "Are you okay, honey? I'm so sorry you had to go through this. It's my fault. If only I had helped Mom take her car in to the shop when the weather was good..." "No, I told her I was coming last week, but then I begged off. It's my fault," Becky countered. "Don't feel that way! You didn't do anything wrong. It wouldn't have taken more than a couple of hours for me to help her; I could have scheduled a long lunch, rearranged a few meetings..." "I told her not to bother you about it, that I would take care of it. She waited because it was what I wanted. If I had just —" "Stop it, both of you!" Tom snapped. "This is hard enough; I can't take your oneupmanship about who feels the most guilt. It was an accident, period. No one is to blame!" Zan opened her mouth to retort, but Becky gently touched her forearm and, looking her in the eye, shook her head slightly. "We don't need to be bickering with each other right now," she said simply, regaining her trademark composure as quickly as she had lost it a few minutes earlier. * "Oh, there you all are! I was wondering when you'd get here." Their father was seated at the dining room table with paperwork spread out before him when they arrived at their parents' home after a grueling trip on ice-covered roads. He showed no signs of grief as he rustled through the papers; indeed, it almost seemed his voice carried a bit of a lilt. "Have you eaten? There's plenty of food in the fridge if you girls want to make something." The three siblings exchanged looks.

Without a word, Becky started toward the guest room, with Zan a half-step behind. “Listen, Dad, Becky’s had a rough day of it. We all have,” they heard Tom begin. “Can you believe it?” Zan murmured under her breath when they were well down the hallway. “A time like this, and he wants us to make a picnic.” “It’s just his way,” Becky replied, pushing open the bedroom door. As she stepped into the room, she was assaulted by a fresh rush of feelings: shock, sorrow, anger — but most of all, exhaustion. She slumped onto the bed, allowing the down comforter and pillow to envelop her, and let out a great sigh. “I know it’s ‘just his way,’ but it stinks,” Zan said. “We’re nothing more than substitute servants to him. Well, he’s going to have to get used to looking after himself, but maybe Officer Wonderful will take pity on him today.” Though struggling to keep her eyes open, Becky gave her sister a wry look. “I think it’s Sergeant Wonderful now,” she said sardonically. Zan may have replied; Becky was unsure as she felt herself beginning to doze. The next voice she was certain she heard was her father’s. “Say, Becky, when you have a chance, I need to talk to you about something.” He sounded distant, but in her subconscious Becky realized it was because she was somewhere between wakefulness and sleep, a state distorting her perception; he was, in fact, just outside the door. With an effort, she opened her eyes and, sitting up, surveyed the room to get her bearings. Although it doubled as the guest room, it was without question her mother’s domain. Her touch was everywhere, from the toile curtains to the handmade tile mosaic atop the bedside table. This was the room where family heirlooms resided — or more accurately, family mementos, since the value of most of the items was primarily sentimental — and it was here that she had worked on craft projects, “piddled around” on the computer and read the mystery books she enjoyed. It had been her refuge, her respite, her sanctuary. “Rebecca, are you awake?” “Yeah, I’ll be there in a minute,” she said, glancing at the clock and realizing only 35 minutes had elapsed. Although she knew irritation was evident in her voice, she thought it sounded better than, “Good God, man, have a modicum of patience!” which was what she really wanted to snap at him. By the time she opened the door, he had made his way back to the pile of documents in the dining room. Neither Zan nor Tom was around. Becky walked over and stood looking at him, waiting for whatever was so important that he had found it necessary to disturb her. “What I need to know is, did you get the death certificate from the hospital?” Becky was incensed but tried to keep her cool. “No. Those come from the county, and it will probably be about a month before they’re available,” she explained. “I ordered six of them to be sent to you. If you need more than that we can request them.” “A month! That’s ridiculous! Why can’t I have it now? And why did you get so many copies? I just need one and I’ll make my own damned copies!” She again bit back an acerbic reply. “A month is how long it takes, Dad. They have to wait for the autopsy, and then a lot of people have to sign off on the paperwork.” “What do you mean, autopsy? I didn’t give permission for that. What a complete waste of time — we know how she died, for Pete’s sake. It’s just a scam to get more money out of me.” “It’s not a scam. State law requires it in cases like this, and you won’t have to pay.” “Oh,” he grudgingly acknowledged. Forestalling his next outburst, she explained that the death certificates she had ordered were certified copies, each considered an original, and were the only type most agencies and businesses would accept. “And don’t worry, you won’t have to pay for those either — I already did,” she added, her disgust over his

preoccupation with the financial impact of the tragedy coming to the fore. “Now if you don’t require anything else at the moment, I need to lie down.” She turned on her heel and walked back to the guest room, her mother’s room, closing the door behind her. Sitting on the bed, she closed her eyes, willing her anger to subside. “It’s just his way,” she muttered under her breath as a reminder to herself before adding, “and yeah, it does stink.” When she felt like this, it was usually her mother she turned to as a sounding board. They were incredibly close, and her stomach ached as she thought of the loss. Although no one could replace her mother, Becky needed companionship. Surmising that her siblings had gone out to retrieve their personal vehicles, she felt rather selfish for wondering if they would be coming back this evening or if she would be stuck here with her father by herself, which to her felt more isolating than being completely alone. Reflexively, she picked up her cell phone to check for messages. The screen was black. She retrieved the charger and plugged in the phone; the screen remained blank, although the LED indicator lit up to show that the unit was charging. Suspecting the worst, she rummaged through the plastic bag they had brought back from the hospital and pulled out her mother’s cell phone, then used it to dial her own number. Her phone rang, but the screen was still dark. “Great, just great. You picked a hell of a time to go on the fritz,” she chastised the phone. “A cell phone with no display. Not a lot of good to me, are you?” Using her mother’s phone, she sent a text message to her siblings: “My phone is fried. Call or text this number if you need me. - Becky.” Their replies arrived within seconds. Tom wrote, “Driving. C U in 1hr,” while Zan said, “Thot u wud b asleep. U ok?” In spite of everything, she smiled at their messages, amused that they had both used the common texting abbreviations she studiously avoided. She responded, advising Tom, “No hurry – drive safely. Don’t reply!!” and telling Zan, “Thanks, I’m fine. Going to bed soon. See you tomorrow.” She briefly pondered why it was that she felt compelled to put up a brave front for them, no matter how awful she really felt. They were grown-ups, after all, both well into their 30s, and worked in careers that didn’t afford them protection from the unpleasantness of life, Tom with the state police and Zan as a corporate attorney. In fact, Becky thought that she, a professor of library sciences, was least professionally equipped among the three of them to handle what had been thrown at her. She was the eldest, however, and behaved in typical oldest-child fashion. Since they had not been close during their adult years, the way she regarded her siblings hadn’t changed much as they had matured. In many respects, she still considered them her kid sister and brother, and the petty squabbles of their youth endured well beyond when they should have expired. At this stage of their lives, however, it wasn’t so much that they disliked one another as it was that they no longer knew each other. Flipping through the photos saved on her mother’s phone revealed a different perspective. Though the siblings had different relationships with their mother, each was full of love and humor, and as rich as the others. An ongoing joke between Zan and their mother involved exchanging photos of a toy bunny in unlikely and sometimes harrowing situations, such as at the entrance to an automatic car wash; Tom often received pictures of homemade meals, to which he responded with images of the pizza or frozen dinner he was eating; and several picture messages documented the whereabouts of both Becky’s purse and her mother’s. Family, friends, arts and crafts, flowers and garden, the beauty of nature — all were chronicled on the device. Becky marveled at how

her mother had embraced technology. Whereas what her father held dear was laid out before him in sheaves of ledgers and statements, volumes of her mother's treasures were here in the palm of Becky's hand. In the most recent image, taken just a week earlier, her mother beamed beside her new car — the car which had been due at the shop that morning for the thorough detailing promised at purchase. Over the considerable objections of her husband, she had earned the money to buy it, researched and selected the model she wanted, negotiated the deal on her own, and put the title in her name alone. Becky had never seen her look happier or more self-assured. Thinking that this was how she wanted to remember her mother, she set the photo as the phone's background wallpaper. It was then that she began to cry — not the distraught sobs of one who has witnessed a horrific accident or the torpid welling up of a person in shock, but the quiet, intimate tears of a woman who misses her mother. * “Your mother was such a lovely person, and she did so much for the community. It’s a great loss for all of us, but especially for you, her family...” Pursing her lips in agreement and nodding, Becky said, “Thank you. She always spoke highly of you,” although she had only the most tenuous notion of who this person was about whom her mother had spoken so highly. However, she didn’t feel disingenuous saying it, since her mother had held nearly everyone in high regard. In the hours since the funeral, Becky had been engaged in dozens of these bits of conversation. She graciously listened, nodded, gave a little half-smile and thanked everyone for their kind words and remembrance of her mother. When she looked across the room, she saw them trying to surreptitiously get her attention: Zan and her husband, Brad, each carried a pair of wine glasses, while Tom wielded two bottles of wine. As they made eye contact, Tom hitched his head toward the basement stairs with a wink, then the three of them nonchalantly made their exit. Becky rolled her eyes and smirked, having never seen a more conspicuous attempt to be inconspicuous. Surveying the remaining guests, Becky recognized most of them as women who came not to mourn her mother, but to jockey for position as her potential replacement. Greeting the few genuine friends along the path, she eased over to the stairway — more discreetly than the suave trio, she congratulated herself — and headed down to join her siblings. To her surprise, it was Brad who handed her a glass of red wine and explained the impromptu gathering. “Zan thought it would be nice to have a private toast to Mom.” “I think that’s a wonderful idea,” she said to the room at large before turning pointedly to her sister. “Thank you.” Zan peered at her expectantly, but Becky remained silent. It had been her sister’s idea, and she should have the honor of making the toast. After a moment’s hesitation, Zan raised her glass, and the rest followed suit. “To Mom,” she began simply, “the best mother of all. We miss your physical presence, but we know you’re always with us.” “To Mom,” the others repeated, all tilting their glasses together, then silence hung over the room for several seconds. “Oh goodness, it brings back memories to be down here and see all this stuff,” Becky eventually said. She picked up a photo from an end table of the three of them as children gazing adoringly at a model Nativity scene. “Remember this? It was the first time Tommy got to pick out what piece we’d add to the set that year.” “Which explains why we had the only crèche that included a sheepdog,” Zan added for the benefit of her husband. “Those shepherds had a lot of ground to cover; they needed some help,” Tom elucidated in mock seriousness. “Well, it looks like you were all happy with the choice,” Brad observed. “We were,”

Becky said. "We all got along very well back then. It wasn't until a few years later that our relationships became strained." Zan snickered. "By 'strained,' she means we were at each other's throats most of the time, especially The Little Prince and I." "Did you ever think that may have been part of the problem, that you dubbed me The Little Prince?" Tom said without a trace of humor. "You did get treated differently than we did," Becky interjected. "Not by Mom, but she didn't have the final say in a lot of matters. Dad let you get away with stuff that would have gotten Zan or me grounded in perpetuity ." Tom appeared crestfallen. "Oh, don't try to tell us you didn't realize that!" Zan scolded him. "I didn't, honestly. Did you two get grounded a lot?" "I did," Zan answered. "Miss Perfect, not so much." "Perhaps giving us sarcastic nicknames was not the best way to foster a loving relationship among siblings," Becky suggested. "You know, I always stood up for you until I found out you called me Miss Perfect behind my back. After that, you were on your own." Now it was Zan who looked dejected. "I'm sorry. It wasn't easy being between you guys." "It wasn't easy being the last in line and having to live up to the unreasonably lofty expectations everyone had because of the high standards set by my sisters — both of my sisters." "It wasn't easy forging the path only to have the pair of you come along and outdo me." An uneasy silence ensued, finally broken by Brad. "I always felt put-upon because I'm an only child," he said, "but I guess having siblings is just as hard in its own way." "Actually, I think it makes a lot of things easier — especially at a time like this," Becky said. Zan and Tom both nodded their agreement. After they had drained the second bottle of wine, Zan announced that she and Brad (who had stopped after one glass) needed to be getting home, but assured her sister and brother that she would be back the following morning to help them with the task of dividing up their mother's personal possessions according to her wishes. In addition to detailing in writing how she wanted her jewelry to be distributed, their mother had told each of her children individually which other items were specifically designated for them "if something happens to me." Each in turn, however, confessed to not paying strict attention because no one thought they would be in this position for years to come. "I hate this," Becky stated bluntly. "I just hate that we have to do this..." "We all do," Tom assured her. "But at least we're in it together. We're not going to fight over anything like some families end up doing." "Yeah, we'll be a united team," Zan agreed. "So...which of my teammates wants to sneak upstairs and see if Brad and I can make a clean getaway or if the merry widower is still holding court for his troupe of trollops?" Becky laughed. "You're incorrigible, do you know that?" she chided her sister, but it was said with great affection. * The following morning found the three of them moving slowly. Unaccustomed to polishing off nearly two-thirds of a bottle of wine each, they were all feeling the aftereffects of the previous evening's indulgence. Tom sat on the edge of the bed in the guest room with his head in his hands while Becky poked through drawers, absentmindedly sifting through the contents. Zan, who was suffering more than either of them, had been given the simple duty of divvying up the jewelry as specifically set out in the list their mother had made. "I don't even know where to start," Becky said, sitting next to Tom. "Do you have any ideas?" He shook his head, not bothering to look up. "Well, we have to do something, " she said, just as Zan walked in on them doing nothing. "What you can do right now is help me find Mom's list. It's not in the drawer where she kept it, and it's not in her nightstand either. Did she put it somewhere in here?" Zan

inquired. "I'm in no condition to have to figure out the disbursement without that list." "It's not here; I just went through every drawer and I didn't see it," Becky replied. "Maybe Dad knows where it is." No one expected the reaction they received when they asked him. "I don't know what you're talking about, there was no list," he insisted. "This is a community property state, so I am the sole heir. You aren't entitled to anything until I die." Becky was dumbfounded. They all knew the list existed; their mother had made a point of telling them about it several times and showing each of them where she kept it tucked away at the back of her top dresser drawer. Pulling her sister aside, Zan hurriedly whispered, "He took it. He took the list and destroyed it, I am absolutely certain, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it." Regardless, Becky persisted in attempting to reason with their father. "We're just trying to follow Mom's wishes, Dad. We're only trying to sort out what she wanted us to have, not to take any of your stuff." "It's all mine!" he bellowed. "You people need to stop pawing through everything and get the hell out of my house! What a bunch of money-grubbing thieves — I'm going to call the police and report you!" Upon hearing that, Zan shot into action. "We have to go," she said. "You heard him; he told us to get out, so we have to get out. I'm sorry, Becky, but that's the way it is." Gathering her coat and purse in one move, she strode over and banged on the closed door of the guest room. "Time to bug out, Tom," she yelled. "The old coot is threatening to call the police if we don't leave, and he's mean enough to do it." "I'm sorry," she mouthed again to Becky on her way out the door. Becky naively decided to make another stab at restoring peace. "You don't really mean that, Dad," she said soothingly. "We're not stealing anything. We'll leave it all here. No one wants to upset you." "The hell I don't mean it — just try me!" he spat at her. "Goddamn right you'll leave everything here...if I find one thing missing I'll charge you all with theft! Now get out, and stay out!" At that instant Tom emerged from the guest room carrying two suitcases. "Come on, let's go. I packed for you. "Becky," he said, shoving one of the bags under his arm and grabbing her with his free hand, "we have to go. We don't have a choice." Disoriented by the sudden maelstrom swirling around her, Becky acquiescently allowed herself to be taken in tow. She felt physically ill and emotionally overwrought at losing both her parents in a single week. * Three months later, Becky had heard of her father but not from him: Notice that he had revoked her power-of-attorney had come from his lawyer; word that he was unceremoniously disposing of all the items he had withheld from his children was delivered by a concerned neighbor; and news that a moving van carrying the possessions of the Queen Trollop had been spotted in the driveway arrived courtesy of Zan. At times Becky was tempted to contact him, to ask what had set him off so badly, to try to grasp how anyone could so despise his own children — but common sense always intervened before she acted on the notion. With the help of her siblings, she had nearly come to terms with their father's estrangement, although she wasn't sure she would ever understand it. "It's like Eugene O'Neill said: 'You can't go home again,'" Zan advised her over coffee one day. "Thomas Wolfe," Becky reminded her. "Eugene O'Neill wrote the line, 'You can't go back to where you've come from' in his play 'A Touch of the Poet'. Thomas Wolfe wrote a book called 'You Can't Go Home Again'. I'm a librarian, remember?" Seeing her sister's annoyance, Becky inwardly scolded herself for the correction and backtracked. "I'm sorry. I do get your point. At least he never called the cops like he threatened to. How embarrassing would that have

been, even though it was completely bogus?” “The only reason he didn’t call them that day was because we got out of there so fast and didn’t take anything with us,” Zan said. “Don’t delude yourself, Becky — if we ever go back to that house again, he will call the police and report that we’re trespassing. For some reason, he has a vendetta against us. I hear things — it’s a small town, and I’m the one who lives there — and he doesn’t have anything good to say about us at all. He even tried to convince the neighbors we were out to swindle him, but luckily they didn’t believe it.” However irrational their father’s behavior, though, it wasn’t what was keeping Becky awake at night. Plagued by insomnia and tormented by recurring nightmares, she hadn’t slept soundly since before the accident, and it was taking a toll on her. She kept her troubles to herself, however, mostly because she didn’t feel there was anyone she could talk to about them. Despite the support of friends and a renewed relationship with her siblings, she often still felt achingly alone. She frequently caught herself, even after all this time, reaching for her cell phone to call or text her mother, only to be reminded that it wasn’t possible — and the void she felt got a little deeper with every such occurrence. *

They had agreed their Christmas get-together would be a low-key affair, a late brunch and gift exchange at Becky’s home. As Becky and Zan worked comfortably together in the kitchen, Brad and Tom brought in the packages. Soon both tasks were complete: The meal was ready to be served, and the base of the tree was decked with gifts of all sizes. One package hadn’t found its way under the tree, however. A large box wrapped in elegant gold foil paper and topped with a red ribbon sat on a sideboard in the dining room. Zan made a beeline for it when she entered the room. “Ooh, what’s this?” she asked playfully. “It doesn’t have a tag.” “Must be from Santa. Maybe it’s for all of us,” Tom replied. He looked as though he could barely contain himself, and Becky decided to play along. “I’m sure Santa wouldn’t mind if we opened it now, would he?” she said. They gathered around it, Brad positioning himself to lift the lid. He did so slowly, careful not to reveal even a peek at the contents until the last moment. With a flourish at the end, he unveiled the surprise: the crèche. “Oh my,” Becky managed to get out before she was momentarily overcome by emotion. “Wait!” Zan exclaimed, a stunned look on her face. “You need to open one of your gifts now, Tom.” She hurried to the tree and searched for a minute before returning with a small box. He tore off the paper, opened the box within and unwound the tissue paper padding the small ceramic object it contained. “Old Shep...now the Nativity set is complete,” he said with a broad smile, carefully setting the sheepdog in its place behind the shepherds. Over brunch, Tom explained how he had been driven, upon overhearing the blowup, to save an item that was sentimental to all three of them and had used their mother’s suitcase to carry out the Nativity set without raising suspicion; Zan told how she had found the sheepdog while looking for the list and had slipped the figurine into her purse; and both said they had felt their mother guiding them to retrieve those particular pieces. They spent the rest of the day reminiscing, laughing and talking, with none of the earlier undertones of jealousy or unresolved hurt feelings. It was late evening when everyone said their goodbyes, and Becky set straight to bed. She checked her cell phone as usual and saw a message from Brad. It was a photo of the three siblings with the crèche, in the exact same positions they had been more than 30 years earlier. She smiled and saved the photo, then flipped back to the wallpaper image of her mother. “As it turns out, Mom,

there are a couple of other people in this world I can talk to — but you already knew that, didn't you? It just took me a while to figure it out," she said. "I guess what that means is, I'm ready to let you go. We really are all right." With that, she opened the new photo of the crèche and pressed 'Set as Wallpaper.' The phone once again displayed her mother and asked 'Are you sure you want to replace wallpaper?' Becky touched the image and said, "I love you, Mom," before selecting 'Yes.' For the first time since the accident, she slept through the night, and awoke the next morning feeling rested, content and at peace with the world. ~ The Beginning ~