

Scars, Scribbles, and the Power of Crayons

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Friday

Chapter 1

Halloween

The first few notes of Bach's Toccata and Fugue blared from the living room stereo and down the hall into my bedroom. This organ music worked for Dracula, so I figured it would work for me too.

I asked Granny to put that piece of music on to help me get into a better mood. It wasn't going to be your normal Halloween party, but I was excited to wear my makeshift gypsy costume. I designed it myself from the clothes I found in Mommie's closet. Cinching her long red gingham skirt around my waist, I tried to pin it in place with Granny's blue crystal broach—much prettier than the safety pin sitting on my nightstand. So much material bunched up, I couldn't fasten it tight enough. With each step, the skirt slipped off my hips.

Did Dracula have this many problems?

Fumbling with the broach, I poked my finger instead of the material. Blood puddled on my thumb. I shoved it into my mouth before it could stain the skirt.

Blick.

A metallic taste coated my tongue. I glanced at the mirror and made a face. Pinching my cheeks, hoping to pull some life back into my skin, I barely recognized the seven-year-old staring back at me through dark circles. I hated mirrors. Was that how all of Dracula's victims felt, or was I just special? He was lucky. He couldn't see the monster in the mirror.

In my new look, I didn't look anything like a gypsy. A ghost wrapped in red and white checkered cloth on her way to a picnic was more like it. A pale, sickly kind of ghost that might float away if a big enough breeze happened to come by. Mommie's white eyelet blouse draped like a balloon, so that thought didn't seem too far-fetched. My own clothes puddled around me,

so in hers, I drowned and waddled in a pool of fabric. Not the look I was going for. But today Mommie was going to let me wear make-up, so at least I would be a pretty gypsy.

I hated necklaces like I hated mirrors. The one exception to this rule—Daddy’s locket. It hung low and close to my heart. He gave it to me last year for my birthday so we could be together no matter how far away he lived. I spun the chain around so I could see the clasp in the mirror. I couldn’t risk wearing it today. I had opened and shut the gold heart so many times it rarely stayed closed. Two photos hid inside. On the right, a picture of Daddy. Curly hair flew wild in the wind. There was so much of it. His eyes teased behind round wire glasses, and the grin on his face revealed evidence of mischief.

Structured life with Granny and Grandpa in Vista, California was nothing like the carefree days in San Francisco. Daddy and I had spent hours walking up and down the park feeding ducks. Thoughts of bread made my mouth water and my stomach growl. I remember eating lots of spinach salad with hard-boiled eggs and all the shrimp we could eat. Daddy went down to the wharf on weekends and got all the shrimp he could carry.

“No one else wants to eat bait,” Daddy growled in his best pirate voice. “But we do.”

At the end of a long day, fishermen would give it to him for free. Most of the locals knew him by name and saved shrimp for him all the time. Sometimes they’d give him free fish when the biting was good. We loved it. I loved it.

Daddy and I ate peanut butter right out of the jar with spoons. Granny would never approve of that behavior, but I was pretty sure Grandpa might do the same if her back was turned long enough. A vague memory of Daddy and I sneaking giant marshmallows out of the cupboard and eating them behind Mommie’s, back played in my mind. She swears she never bought them, but knowing Daddy? He had a stash somewhere.

In those days, we never stayed in one place for very long. We got to move from flat to flat exploring different neighborhoods in the city because Mommie and Daddy house-sat for friends all the time. With new adventures around each corner, I never got bored. The steep hills of San Francisco made every trip in our old VW Bug feel like a free-fall off the edge of a cliff. It made my eyes pop and set Mommie's nerves on edge. I don't remember much about the day that car stalled and broke down, but I know it was in front of a railroad crossing. Daddy said that red Beetle-Bug-bucket-of-bolts wasn't worth saving. We abandoned it next to the tracks and hitchhiked home. Unsure why, I cried like I had lost my best friend. After that, we walked a lot, and I rode the trolley to school.

When we moved again, our friends in the flat below us had a gold Pinto and talked Daddy into buying one. They put a yellow happy-face pin into the matching carpet next to the stick shift. I wanted to do the same, but was crushed when Daddy drove up in a little blue Pinto. I never liked that color, and I never found a pin to match the carpet. So many memories from the past blurred together, so I was never sure if they were all real or imagined.

My gaze drifted to the photo on the left side of the locket—a picture of me right after Mommie and I had moved in with Granny and Grandpa. My hair was so thick.

Ugh.

I closed the locket, put it inside my jewelry box, then faced the bed. There on the pillow lay a mound of blonde hair. More underneath the covers.

“Lolly! Lollapalooza!” Granny sang the nickname she gave me. “You left your blue bandana in my bedroom.”

I ran to the bed and threw the covers over Tuffy, my stuffed dog, and the sheets covered in hair. The door snapped open and I gasped, spinning around just in time. Granny's suspicious

eyes caught me.

“What are you doing in here?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I lied.

The pile of hair hid under the lacy bedspread while guilt spread across my smile. Granny and Mommie rarely touched my hair. Washing it was a *major* undertaking. I’d lie flat on my back on the kitchen counter while Mommie held my neck in the palm of her hand over the sink. Granny would slowly pour lukewarm water over my head, avoiding my eyes, never pulling, never tugging the tangles. I wished I could jump into the shower like everyone else.

I should be bald right now, just like Andy.

“Thank heavens for that thick Italian hair.”

They took turns marveling over my full head of hair. But I knew they didn’t believe it. Their eyes betrayed the lie, just like so many others meant to spare my feelings. Wishing they would stop, smiling while dying inside, I went along with little hope. Late at night, across the hall, when she thought I was asleep, Mommie cried. During the day, desperate whispers seeped through walls when they thought I was playing. Like a great actress in the final act just before her death scene, I put on a show. Put on a brave face.

“Be sure to make your bed before you leave, Lolly.” Granny smiled and held up the blue bandana.

I stood and stared at the brush on my dresser. As the last few notes of Bach’s Fugue came to an end, Granny interrupted my daydreaming.

“Alexandra Van Dervoort, have you heard a word I’ve said?”

The broach popped open and my gypsy skirt slipped to the floor.

“Let me help you with that.” Granny kneeled on the floor and pulled the skirt tight.

Please don't look at the bed. Please don't look at the bed.

She pinned the skirt in place with the huge safety pin before I had time to object. Then she fastened the crystal broach over the top.

Why didn't I think of that?

“Perfect,” she said. “Now the bandana.” The twisted material in her hands matched the worry on her face. The expression made me want to throw my arms around her and tell her everything was going to be okay—that I was going to be okay.

“I can do it Granny.” I smiled when her speckled jade eyes met mine.

“All right,” she sighed. “Your mother is warming up the car so you need to hurry.”

She jumped up, and made her way down the hall singing, “Oh Divine Redeemer.”

Turning back to the mirror, I wrapped the bandana around my head, and let a few crooked bangs peek out. When the coast was clear, and Granny was back in the kitchen banging around, I pulled the hairy pillowcase off, crunched it up, and shoved it under the bed. I'd shake it out in the trash later and clean up the rest of the sheets tomorrow. There was no time right now, and it would be impossible to do it after the Halloween party.

Sneaking into the hall closet, I snatched a fresh pillowcase and quickly made my bed. I breathed out a long sigh of relief. There would be plenty of time to put on makeup in the little blue Pinto. The ride would take an hour, depending on traffic. Grabbing Tuffy and a small makeup case, I took one last look into the mirror.

Definitely a gypsy ghost.

At least I looked like a girl now. Skipping down the hall, I hummed the song, “Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves.”

Chapter 2

Hall of Horrors

I gazed out the windshield at the high-rise building sitting on top of the hill—looked like a haunted house to me. It certainly felt like one inside. The living dead, ghosts like me, walked its halls and corridors while vampires and other bloodsuckers hid behind doors. They preyed on the innocent, spreading toxic venom into the veins of their victims. The real monsters, the ones you couldn't see, left a red trail like breadcrumbs to the catacombs below. No one followed that path. No one dared. Death stood at that doorway. I took a deep breath. We were almost there, so I checked my makeup one last time.

“Don't bite your lip,” Mommie scolded for the millionth time. It was a bad habit. Half of the time I didn't realize I was doing it, and I didn't understand why it was so important to stop. “You need more lipstick. Grab some out of my purse.” Mommie was a firm believer that lipstick makes a prettier face.

I dug into her blue cloth bag, which looked more like my bandana than a regular purse. She owned several of these bags in different colors and chose which one to use depending on her outfit. I pulled out a history book on Russia and put it in my lap. Everything else tossed about inside willy-nilly. It took forever to find anything and the contents of each purse were different. She could never remember what items hid inside any given bag on any given day. I think we spent more time looking for her lost car keys than we actually spent in the car.

Hairbrush, case for her glasses, a packet of tissue.

Tissues. I needed those for sure, so I placed the packet on top of the folded garbage bag lying on the floor.

Okay, what other treasures might I find? One leather coin purse.

Daddy bought that for Mommie on her birthday, a long time ago. After the divorce, we lived alone. Then one day, Mommie stuffed our suitcases into the Pinto in the middle of the night and told me we were going to live with Granny and Grandpa. Soon after, Daddy took a bar test, became a lawyer, and moved to some “hoe-dunk place,” as Mommie called it, way up in northern California. Last summer, Daddy and I went boating on the lake and fishing in the river. He even taught me how to swim in the deep end of the pool. Oroville. I loved it there.

I turned the little purse over in the palm of my hand and traced the embossed design with my finger. Hippies always sold little handcrafted goods on the street where we lived. They strummed guitars, beat drums, sang folksongs, and danced on the sidewalk. I joined in their celebrations whenever possible. Closing my eyes, I held the leather to my nose.

Mmm, Haight Street.

“Didn’t I put any lipstick in that bag?” Mommie interrupted the memory.

“Still looking.”

That was the second time someone startled me today, and the Halloween party hadn’t even started. I dropped the coin purse back into the bag and shuffled through all the various slips of paper, notes, and receipts, pushing them aside. A new roll of Certs, a half-empty box of green Tic-Tacs, and a half-empty roll of butterscotch Lifesavers caught my attention. Now those I couldn’t live without, so I left them in the bottom of the bag. Unzipping the side pocket—

Jackpot.

Two lipsticks. One bright red, and the other an earthy brown. I picked the red one to match my skirt. As the car swerved into the parking lot, I almost missed my lower lip. Out of habit, I glanced up, scanning the road for any hidden “*Copus-stellecti*”—Grandpa’s name for the police. Mommie collected tickets for speeding and rolling through stop signs like most people

collect stamps and coins. The Copus-stellecti pulled us over almost as many times as Mommie lost her keys. She must have had a lot on her mind because she was always in a hurry. Always unorganized. When the coast was clear, I smacked my lips together, smearing bright red from my lower lip to my top lip.

“Oh, no you don’t,” she said.

Mommie zipped into the last parking space. She took the lipstick from me and traced my lips, top, and bottom.

“Now blot.” She grabbed a tissue from her pocket, folded it over once and held it to my lips. “Open. Close. Open.” I followed her instruction. “Perfect.”

She pulled my chin up to inspect my face. I knew what was coming next. The soft wax felt warm. Mommie took my face in her hands and used both thumbs to push and pull the color onto my cheeks.

“Ow!” I cried.

“Beautiful.”

Mommie pulled my chin up once more until I met her glassy eyes. Her lips smiled and her voice sang, but I knew better. She wasn’t the only one with a brave face.

Moments later, we stepped into the elevator and made our way down to the basement. The chill made me shiver and I wished I had brought my sweater.

Do gypsies wear sweaters?

The large metal doors opened, I stepped out into the corridor and gazed down at the painted lines on the floor. The trail of blue, red, and yellow lay before me.

Let the games begin.

I stepped onto the blue line, like I had so many times before, and placed one foot in front

of the other. The width of my feet fit perfectly.

This is my balance beam. I will not be distracted by the other two lines. The goal? Improve speed and never fall. Rule number one: No fear.

The gymnast who showed signs of panic fell off the beam. Every time. I could always tell who would fly through the routine, stick the landing, and score a perfect 10. The wimps wobbled, lost focus, and crashed. Never pretty. It was all about confidence. Absolutely no distractions. I had never walked the line in a long skirt before. It made speed difficult.

“Can you hold Tuffy?”

I paused, determined to make it down the hall of horrors without wobbling, without falling—without taking my eyes off the blue line. I handed my most prized possession to Mommie. We both fell silent.

In a haunted house, you know terror hides behind every door. Spooks haunt each stair well. Ghouls creep through halls and lurk in dark spaces. Heartbeats thump and throb inside your head as your gut churns. Icy shivers rattle your teeth. Nerves tingle, chills quake, and fear chases your pulse. You scream, but some invisible force grips your throat—seizes your voice. You can't speak. You've forgotten how. No whisper escapes. You want to run. Every fiber of your being knows you must. But you don't. You can't. Death waits. You know it. The monsters know it.

I pressed forward even as the yellow line turned right, breaking free from the red and blue lines that ran parallel to each other down the hallway.

Keep moving. Maintain speed. Don't lose balance.

The blue line at my feet made a sharp turn to the left. But my gaze followed the red line in front of me as it continued forward, swallowed by the silent abyss leading to the graveyard. I tried not to think about the other ghosts, my lost friends, who had followed that line.

I'm supposed to be brave. I'm supposed to be strong.

I never stepped on the red trail. Instead, I was forced to walk another. I turned to my left. This nightmare was real. This was no game. Like the zombie's gaze possessed, my eyes fixed at the end of the hall to the dungeon.

Tuffy was back in my arms. Game over. Mommie's hand squeezed mine. Down the hallway of horrors, we walked together. At the end of the blue line, above a set of double doors, hung an old beat-up sign—Pediatric Outpatient Clinic. In silence, we walked into the vampire's lair.

Chapter 3

Dungeon

Everything in the tiny waiting room looked the same every Friday. The same set of victims held various objects of comfort—a favorite blanket, rag doll, or stuffed animal. Some just sucked their thumbs. They sat with their parents, lined up against the wall, on white plastic chairs. Each week the little ones came, waiting their turn. Waiting for the vampires in white coats to bite while parents sat by and watched.

But today was different. Orange and black crepe paper hung from the ceiling. A few twisted strands of orange draped across the bulletin board, usually covered in fliers, or notes for the medical staff. Those had been taken down, replaced by Halloween decorations. Nothing scary. Lots of black cats with bulging eyes, grinning pumpkins with missing teeth, and cackling witches on broomsticks. I enjoyed the change, but it couldn't hide the sick, yellow paint on the walls that made me want to heave. Yellow was Mommie's favorite color, but this particular shade of nausea screamed. Clearly, the grown-up who picked that color never barfed chemo.

Someone went through a lot of trouble to make things festive. But the tiny space still smelled like death and doom. It was as if an invisible coffin sat wide open in the middle of the room. I didn't think the other children had a clue about what was really going on here. Maybe it was better that way. I made it a point never to look any of them in the face. Too dangerous. I only watched them out of the corner of my eye.

Every other week another child went missing. It was an evil kind of magic. They simply vanished. If you asked the monsters what happened to your friend, silence followed. They were suddenly deaf. Quivering lips whispered between adults. There were so many bloodshot eyes. Eyes like Mommie's. Parents held their little ones tighter, hands grasped in prayer, and mothers

crossed themselves. All of this was nothing new, except for the—

“No way.” my mouth dropped.

Food. A huge tray of chocolate cupcakes with orange frosting sat in the corner. Hunger clawed my stomach.

That is so unfair.

I let go of Mommie’s hand and walked over to the treats. I expected costumes and decorations, but this?

“*Disculpe.*” A Mexican woman I didn’t recognize interrupted. Her trembling hands held a glass pitcher of orange juice. “Would you like some juice?” she asked.

I stared at the acid sloshing back and forth. My mouth shut tight and my eyes bugged out bigger than the eyeballs of the witch’s cat stapled to the wall. I squeezed Tuffy tighter and shook my head.

Who’s responsible for this torture?

I followed her with my gaze as she sat down next to her daughter, a chubby little girl scribbling away in a coloring book. She looked about half my age and was dressed in the cutest black cat costume I had ever seen. The first thing I noticed was her thick jet-black hair. Perfectly straight strands of ebony brushed her shoulders. On top of her head perched a pair of felt ears attached to a plastic headband. She wore a black leotard, tights, and tiny slippers. Her feet kicked back and forth in the air far from the floor. Her little nose was painted black, and three black whiskers across each cheek completed her costume. I felt a twinge of jealousy as I admired the little cat from across the narrow room.

Our eyes met. She stared at me with deep dark eyes. There was no expression on her face. None. We just stared at each other. I wanted to look away but she held my gaze. Every face in

the room was easy to read, except hers. It was blank. Empty.

Her mother said something to her in Spanish and the little cat's eyes left mine as her mother offered her the cup of juice.

I gasped. *Don't Drink That.*

I screamed inside, but it was too late. The cup was already half empty. My body flinched, remembering the orange juice that quenched my thirst, only to come back up minutes later. Sweet acid burned all the way up. The flame raged through tender nostrils. After blowing my nose, it was raw. The taste of sickening sweet acid festered inside my mouth. The thought of my little cat suffering made my heart ache. She was so tiny, almost a baby.

Cruel, sick joke.

In a flash, her mother lifted her off the chair and carried her down the hall. A monster wearing a white lab coat lead the way. As they left the waiting room, those eyes peeked over the top of her mother's shoulders and stared straight into mine. Again, I was hypnotized by her magic. I wanted to save her from this hell, but I couldn't even save myself.

When they disappeared through the door, I glanced at the half-empty cup of juice sitting next to her coloring book. I marched across the room, grabbed the cup of poison, and dumped it into the trash.

A sudden flash of light startled me. Blinking several times, my eyes glanced upward at the giant standing in front of me. Short curls peeked out from behind a Polaroid camera.

"I love your costume," Maureen bellowed. Her big laugh followed her big voice. "You look like a real gypsy, Lexi." She winked at me with soft eyes and a smirk.

Before she could pull the photo from the camera, I threw my arms around her waist. Maureen was the only angel in this dungeon. The one we all loved. The one who loved us.

Maureen held my hand when I was scared and all alone. She held the tray for me when I got sick. Her pockets were filled with hard candy that soothed sore throats and masked the taste of chemo. Maureen fanned the photo in the air and blew on it. She might be a giant, but in a room full of monsters, she was the Good Witch.

“Have you seen all the photos on the bulletin board yet?” She pointed back to the wall right above the treats.

“Um, not yet.” I tried to hide my scowl.

“Let’s put your picture up with the others.” She crossed the room and tacked it to the board.

My neck ached looking up, but I recognized most of the faces. Almost all of the Friday morning regulars were there. I studied a picture of Andy wearing his hat. He never went anywhere without it.

Are the kids at school still teasing you for being bald?

I didn’t see Andy in the waiting room, so he must have come early. My picture was almost finished developing. Mommie was right. Lipstick made a big difference—just wish I had smiled. Scanning the other children’s photos, admiring their costumes, I saw her—my little cat, thumb in mouth—staring into the camera with those deep dark eyes. She must have supernatural powers to cast this kind of spell over me.

“I brought some brand-new coloring books.” Maureen smiled down at me. Her eyes almost sparkled as she gave me another wink. “Thought maybe you could use one of those to help with your story today.”

I smiled back. “Thanks, Maureen.”

I turned and stared at the stack of coloring books. Only one interested me. I walked to the

empty chair, sat down, and flipped through the pages of the coloring book belonging to the little girl who haunted me, hoping to find something that would make an interesting story. Finally, I found one. It wasn't a great picture, but the man on the page smiled, and I liked his old-fashioned convertible. A little red scribble ran across the page, so I picked up the box of crayons and colored the convertible bright red. This was *her* page, and I was going to use it to tell my story.

“Did you see that cute little girl in the cat costume?” Mommie asked.

How could I miss her?

“Does she have the same thing I do?”

I didn't know why I asked. Nobody else had Hodgkin's Disease—rare in children my age, especially stage 3B. Most of the children who came on Fridays had leukemia.

“No, poor little thing has a brain tumor. They live in Tijuana, so they have to travel all this way for treatment.” Mommie sighed. “This is their first time. You should introduce yourself the next time you see her.”

Mommie's concern for proper manners reminded me to nod. Maybe next time I might smile at the tiny siren. But deep inside, doubts bubbled. No story about the man and his red convertible surfaced, so I colored away.

No matter how much it burns today, don't lose control. Choke the fear. Push it down.

Bury it.

Coloring the last section of my little cat's page left me hollow. Searching the room for a new distraction made it worse. I knew I had to stay focused, but my mind drifted. Shutting my eyes, I tried to forget the memory.

Chapter 4
Memories of the Evil Tube

“I’m gonna die. I’m gonna die. I know I’m gonna die!” My cries chased a weeping monster out of the room.

Good, let them all leave.

“Lexi, stop pulling the tube out of your nose honey, or we’ll have to tie your hands again.” The mucus-sucking fiend’s voice tried to win me over.

“I can’t breathe. It’s gonna kill me.” I kicked him.

“Try to breathe through your mouth,” he coaxed.

My mind raced. I had nearly choked myself pulling the evil thing out. My nose had finally cleared, I could breathe again, and was drifting to sleep—until that mucus-sucking fiend came in and ruined everything.

“Ice, I need ice chips,” I cried.

“Will someone get her some ice chips?” The benevolent fiend turned and raised his voice toward the curtain separating my bed from the nurses’ desk. He reached down and touched my hand.

My hero.

He was here to save me, not kill me. The thought of waking up from this nightmare was too good to be true.

“Absolutely no ice until the doctor checks in.” The voice behind the curtain seethed.

“Lexi,” his voice was firm, “we have to put the tube back in.”

“No!” Screaming didn’t help my thirst.

“I want you to relax.” He released my hand and reached for something on top of a silver

tray.

Don't put it back in. Don't put it back in.

I watched in horror as he opened a sealed bag with a fresh tube inside. Bursting into tears, I ripped the bag from his hands.

“I need some help here,” the mucus sucker yelled while pinning my hands down.

“I’m gonna die.” I thrashed my arms and legs. Searing pain ripped down the center of my stomach.

What did they do to me?

I squeezed my eyes shut, and screamed again, “I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die—” I gasped for breath. “I know I’m gonna die.”

“Grab her hands.” My hero-turned-villain ordered. “Be careful of that arm. I don’t want that IV coming out”

I screamed as the bloodsuckers tied my wrists to the metal frame of the ICU bed.

“Hold her feet down until I get this tube in.” My villain snapped another order.

“No,” I begged through sobs. “No. Please don’t.”

Choking, unable to breathe, every muscle inside my body stiffened as the mucus monster threaded the thick plastic tube down my nose, scraping the back of my throat as it made its way down to my stomach. Somewhere in my subconscious mind, I stepped onto the blood-red line on the basement floor and followed it to the catacombs below.

I know I'm gonna die.

“Is Lexi’s uncle still sitting outside our door?” The nurse behind the curtain asked.

“Yep.” The therapist scribbled on Lexi’s chart. “He just sits there on the floor against the

wall holding that stuffed dog.”

A young nurse walked in holding a fresh saline bag. “Shh. He’s right outside the door.” She replaced the empty bag on the IV pole. “He’s crying.”

“I’ve told him the waiting room is more comfortable,” the therapist said, “but he refuses to leave.”

“Well, a grown man should know better.” The nurse poked her head out from behind the curtain.

“He’s barely my age, and his name is John,” the young nurse said. “Leave him alone.”

“He can’t sit there all night.” The nurse stood and flung the curtain aside.

“He won’t leave until we give Lexi her dog,” the therapist said. “Apparently, Tuffy has never missed a single surgery, treatment, or blood draw.”

“Rules are rules.” She marched across the room. “No stuffed animals in ICU.”

It must have been the dead of night. My side of the room was dark. So exhausted. So thirsty. Those monsters were killing me. I could feel my body dying.

“Please,” I whispered. “Ice. Ice chips.” My throat burned. “Please. I’ll be good.” I sobbed, pulling at my wrists, tied to the bed. Pain shot through my right arm as the IV needle shifted.

“I’ll be good this time.” Breathing through my mouth, I struggled to find enough strength to call the monster behind the curtain. “Please. I promise to be good.”

It was no use. No one could hear me. No one was coming.

“I’m gonna die,” I whispered.

I’m know I’m gonna die. My heavy eyes closed in surrender. Please.

Reaching with my fingers, I felt the top of Tuffy's soft head.

Chapter 5

Christina

Staring at my little cat's coloring page, the voices and sounds of the pediatric dungeon blended into each other. I was trapped by memories of my big surgery, the evil tube, and the hospital stay that wiped out everything normal in my life. Whenever I let my guard down, those nightmares still haunted me.

"Lexi, would you like a Tootsie Pop?" Maureen stood in front of me holding something small and round. I watched the brown wrapper spin. Her words made no sense.

"Earth to Lexi," she said waving the sucker in front of my eyes until it registered.

That's my favorite.

It took me a minute to respond. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, little space cadet," she said "You must have a great story planned. I've never seen you so focused."

My mouth watered as I took the candy from her hand. With a wink, she was off to the next patient, digging deep into her lab coat pockets for more lollipops and hard candy. For a moment, she reminded me of Christina. No one here knew her. From our original group of children, I was the only one left.

Christina had been about the same age as me, maybe a year older. She had long hair like corn silk and eyes that sparkled.

The loudest person in the room, she laughed, told jokes, and played with the toddlers. One of them was usually on her lap sucking a lollipop. All the children loved her. Parents too. Christina would sneak up behind Maureen, dig deep into her pockets and fly around the room each Friday and deliver candy like it was a miracle cure. I would never dream of doing

something so bold. Maureen tried to get me to pass out candy after Christina disappeared, but my heart wasn't in it. I couldn't replace her. No one could. She could get almost anyone in the dungeon to smile. That's exactly what the monsters hoped she would do for me.

My first few months of treatment were traumatic—for everyone. Drawing my blood every single Friday in the children's lab became an impossible task. I didn't know if those little kids were more afraid of the bloodsucker's needles or me, the savage harpy screaming bloody murder every time someone touched her. The vampires finally sent me upstairs to the adult lab. That wasn't any better. I just terrified all the old people instead. Over time, they gave up too, insisting Maureen draw my blood. She tried bribing me with candy, but nothing worked.

And the chemo sessions—just the sight of needles sent me over the edge. In the beginning, Granny came to help because things were so bad. I was convinced every lab coat was out to kill me, so the monsters came up with a plan. They thought it would be a great idea for me to watch Christina get her chemotherapy treatment. Their master plan didn't turn out the way they had hoped.

Christina skipped into the exam room and jumped up on the table like she was there to play a game. It was rude to stare, but I couldn't help myself. Glancing around the room, I was surprised to find us alone. In the corner stood a silver tray where the vampires kept their needles and venom. Cold tingled.

“Come up here and sit by me.” Christina slapped the exam table.

No way. I'm not getting up there.

“Come on, Lexi. Jump up here with me.” The yellow lollipop in her mouth nearly fell out.

“I don’t think they’ll let me,” I whispered.

Please don’t make me sit up there. Please don’t make me sit up there.

“Sure, we will.” Maureen swooped in and plopped me on top of the table next to Christina. Dr. Kung followed. They were all insane. I glanced down at my trembling hands holding a cherry Tootsie Pop.

“How are you today, Lexi?” Dr. Kung asked.

I lifted my gaze from the candy straight into Dr. Kung’s almond-shaped eyes. At first glance, someone might think she was a child wearing a lab coat. Her black hair was pulled into a tight bun. She didn’t wear makeup. She didn’t need to. Her skin was creamy and translucent.

“Fine,” I squeaked.

Looking into her eyes, I felt a calmness begin to settle. She had that effect on me. I didn’t get to see her very often. She traveled to conference after conference looking for experimental drugs and treatments, or doing research trying to save us. I wished she could find some experimental drug to spare me from serum mustard. The thought of my personal poison made me queasy.

“Good.” She placed her hands on my knees. “I’m so happy you decided to sit through Christina’s treatment today. I think this will really help you.”

The little lines around her eyes seemed to smile back at me. Warmth moved up my legs, straight up my spine, and into my face. I smiled despite my feeling inside.

“You ready Christina?” Maureen said, wheeling the silver tray toward us.

Panic struck. Metallic chrome covered my tongue. Dr. Kung released my knees and stepped back to make room for the tray.

Get that away from me. Get it away. Get it away.

I had followed Christina into that torture chamber like a zombie.

Don't look at the tray. Don't look at the tray.

Christina pulled up her sleeve and thrust her arm out stiff and straight into the air. "I'm ready." She smiled at the needles and venom.

"You're a regular pro at this, aren't you?" Maureen took her arm and went right to work.

"Yes, I am." Christina's bravery took me by surprise.

Everything in the room disappeared except for Christina's pale arm. She pulled it straight down between her legs. We were so close. I could feel her body move up and down as she breathed. That's when I realized I had stopped breathing. Blood rushed inside my head. It drowned out every other sound in the room.

I tried to look away, but it was no use. Maureen worked quickly. Christina never flinched, even when the snakebite pierced her skin. My vision blurred. All I wanted to do was jump off the table and run. Run as fast and far away as possible.

"No, let me do it," Christina said. Her eyes lit up as she turned her gaze from Maureen to Dr. Kung. "You let me do it before," she begged.

Do what? Do what? What's she talking about?

I turned to look at Dr. Kung. She stood in the corner with her arms folded and nodded once to Maureen. A wave of nausea rolled. I could almost taste the sick. I stared at the syringe filled with an unfamiliar poison. The needle was inserted into the plastic tubing connected to Christina's arm by a butterfly needle. Maureen released the syringe. Christina took it and held it like a toy. I watched in horror as she pushed her own medicine. I almost heaved.

"Remember to go slowly," Maureen coached, "Not too fast."

"I know, I know," she whined.

Thoughts raced as a foul taste overwhelmed me. Was this what they wanted me to do?

Push my own poison?

I don't think so. Never.

Did they honestly think this would help me? Sudden rage melted my fear.

Nope. Wrong. I'll die before I ever do that, before I ever come back to this hellhole. No one is going to touch me. No one.

I ripped the wrapper from the cherry sucker and thrust the Tootsie Pop into my mouth.

I'm out of here. Gone. I'm never coming back. They'll have to kill me first.

[Scars, Scribbles, and the Power of Crayons](#) is available on Amazon