

Eye of Truth

Miss. Jacklyn Miller, or simply 'Jackie' to herself, stood beside the window of the third-floor classroom and gazed upon the students below. She was a woman who had just crossed the threshold from her twenties to her early thirties and had only recently accepted the notion of approaching middle age. Her hair wasn't unique by any measure, a classic mid-length cut by the stylist's suggestion. The mannequins and the stock photos adorning the local 'treasure hunt' budget clothing store walls designed her outfits. Jackie was an adjunct English Literature Professor for a local community college. The campus' name being of such low importance that locals would've been excused for forgetting its existence.

On this day, Jackie noted many things from her perch high above. She could watch the comings and goings of the student body. The chatter of students transitioning between classes was a whisper to her. The masses below were too absorbed in their particular struggles to even register the true beauties in life. For example, the crunch of a fallen leaf beneath their feet or the sun setting early into evening as fall transitioned to winter. Lost in the stressors and turmoil of everyday life, everyone focused on themselves. Nobody would ever give a second thought to Jackie. To them, college life was a precious balancing act of education, personal time, family struggles, and everything leading up to their future. A teacher they'd have for merely one semester was only worth the grade they received.

To everyone, Jackie was nobody. Who could blame them?

To Jackie, everybody was somebody. Who would blame her?

Unknown to anyone, Jackie developed a hobby that had quickly dominated every minute of free time. In the past Jackie enjoyed taking a second to secretly observe the goings-on around her, something anyone with time and loneliness could manage. However, in recent months, her inclination to watch people had taken a much more obsessive turn. Lately, it was like somebody had flipped a switch that she couldn't turn off, and this once novel act of being a passive outside observer had morphed outside of her control. It used to be enough to catch a faint smile after someone received wonderful news, or a grimace of anger as someone's awful day just got that smidgen worse. That wasn't adequate anymore. Now Jackie needed to know everything.

Whenever Jackie couldn't keep up and became overwhelmed with information, she would scribble notes in a hasty scrawl across her rapidly wearing journal. She always carried one closely and replaced them frequently as their pages filled up. It was a compulsion of Jackie's, chronicling each detail her five senses could detect, no matter how minuscule or obscure. A shift in gait, tone of voice, grades, or relations. To anyone who was somebody, nothing escaped Jackie's sharp *Eye of Truth*.

Jackie wasn't naive. On some level, she directly linked this strange habit to a terminal diagnosis she had received shortly after she had finished filling out her first notebook. Her need to exist through the lives of others had turned into a nightmarish fixation in the same month that her doctor informed her something untreatable was breaking down her brain. Jackie knew that wasn't a minor coincidence.

Jackie grieved for her suddenly shortened life, more particularly for the life she'd never be able to lead. She, like everybody, had dreams now painfully abandoned without ever having a chance. Jackie wept for the 'what ifs' and 'could-have-beens.' Taking inventory of a lifetime of missed opportunities made the isolation that characterized her life all the more painful. In all this time, by either cruel fates or her own decisions, she was utterly alone. To anybody, Jackie was nobody. The most difficult fact for Jackie was that she'd pass with nobody but herself. Jackie didn't have any family or friends to lean on, confide in, and breakdown to.

Jackie was truly alone.

The remaining relief granted to Jackie in the face of her terminal diagnosis were the snapshots of lives being led around her. Watching from her third-floor roost, Jackie could find solace in her vicarious daydreams. Anyone who'd chance over her notebooks would quickly conclude she was becoming a stalker. Yet, in Jackie's head, which was cemented into anything but reality, she'd call it a duty. If she wouldn't appreciate their lives for them, who would? They could ignore life that passed before them, but she never did. She'd fantasize about walking a mile in their shoes and experience their stories for them, make their fantastical dreams a reality.

A reality now denied forever for her.

"Downright Criminal," Jackie muttered darkly to herself while penning another observation in her notebook. She closed the notebook and set it aside on a nearby empty desk. She crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one leg. Sick of documenting those below her, it exhausted her mind that now pleaded for a respite. Despite her need to document everybody, today Jackie cared little for anybody that was somebody. Jackie

positioned herself dutifully at this window for one specific person. Someone special in ways that not even Jackie could figure out.

Jackie had also gained an ever consuming sense of paranoia. She was aware of someone watching her these days. She'd graduated from the observer to the observed. Whenever she'd be alone in her house, preparing for class, picking up groceries, or even watching others, she'd often feel all the hairs stand up on end as an unknown observer seemed just as curious about her as she was of everybody. It initially frightened her considerably, but as the days changed to months with the events increasing in frequency, she looked forward to these occasions. It offered Jackie a perspective about her hobby that she'd never appreciated before.

She felt noticed.

Jackie'd grown fixated on that sensation when it arrived despite being unable to locate the source. And when the invisible attention faded, the world collapsed around her. To Jackie, without this unseen attention, she didn't even exist at all. Like an addict fiending for a fix, Jackie would count on the presence to return and despair at the next time it would leave her. She considered this a warning that she wasn't well, but she couldn't bring herself to care. This was all she had left. Knowledge that someone finally wanted to learn about her day.

Nothing stole that euphoric sensation quicker than the student who'd just appeared in Jackie's view, Isabelle. Seconds before she saw Isabelle, Jackie felt her mood plummet as the presence watching her vanished, and Isabelle walked across the campus. Whatever was watching Jackie clearly preferred Isabelle to her, and Jackie obsessed over that. No matter how much Jackie searched for that one thing that made Isabelle different from anybody else, she couldn't. Isabelle had long blonde hair, always perfectly straight and so smooth that it defied even the strongest winds. She was conventionally attractive and fashionable based on the limited knowledge Jackie had on recent trends. She didn't appear to have a sadistic streak nor a specific trend of saintliness either. Isabelle, for all intents and purposes, was just an ordinary young woman pursuing an education, just like anybody else strolling along the campus grounds.

Jackie needed to identify why Isabelle was more interesting than her. Jackie continued to find excuses to examine her, add to the notebook, and then keep studying. She knew if she continued watching, she'd discover that something that made Isabelle so different.

"Look at me. Dammit. I'm right here." Jackie whispered aloud, a plea for any relief to the painful emotions that had taken hold in the presence's absence.

Isolation

Jackie threw her legs over the side of her bed and pressed her feet against the cold hardwood flooring of her house. She doubled over and clutched her face with one palm, grimacing in torment. She'd been forcefully awoken to a piercing headache that had awoken her from the nightmare she was suffering. Jackie focused as desperately as she could through the misery to hold onto any quickly fading scenes or images she'd just seen, but she fought a futile battle. Jackie only found a small success and recalled a single word. Jackie frantically pulled the chain to turn on her lamp.

She pulled out one of her many bookmarked journals strewn about the household off the nightstand and struggled to record that singular word. Jackie mouthed the word several times, even trying to sound it out, and after a disheartening moment made worse by the throbbing headache, she couldn't figure out a single letter to record it with. She flung the notebook down on the nightstand and grabbed several medications that were set beside it.

She'd counted out several medications while murmuring to herself the dosages with bitter mockery. 'Two for pain every 4 hours... as needed. One, twice a day with food. Can't consume alcohol with this one... or any of them actually...' Until eventually counting out the requisite eight. With a purse of her lips, she added another one to the pile in her hand, 'Three for pain.'

Jackie hesitated instead of gulping them. 'What time is it? Am I supposed to take them now? Did I take them before bed?' She scanned around the room, dazed, while her headache worsened. 'I'll need to take them eventually, may as well do it now, so I don't forget again.' Jackie thought as she took them.

Jackie stood up with one hand still held to the side of her face. Covering one eye helped with the headache considerably, and besides that, it seemed to help ease the nausea from standing upright all at once. She wandered through the house and flipped on the lights as she went. Jackie looked for something to do. It was still late, and she recently stopped participating in any of her old recreational habits that had passed these quiet evenings. She typically had a lot of free time, and in addition to that she found herself with more than she

was used to. Jackie had recently lost her job as they deemed her incapable to instruct with her declining condition.

Jackie glanced over the books and movies that furnished the shelves in her living room and shook her head at them. They used to entertain her and took up a significant chunk of her down time. But now they were nothing better than a sentimental reminder of a world she'd left behind. Jackie had more meaningful matters to concentrate on now. Besides that, she figured watching actual stories and real people was more compelling than fiction could promise. A testament to that belief were the growing piles of unorganized notebooks left scattered across the household.

All she'd accomplished in recent history was watching people from afar, collect observations, and try her best to set up for the final days. Waiting for when she ultimately had the full picture that the presence was seeking to teach her. She continued to attempt to vocalize the word from the dream. It had a singsong quality to it. She knew it fit into a larger chant or cadence. In addition to the newest word, the other ones she'd learned thusfar also had a place in a complete melody. Like pieces of a puzzle, Jackie had to figure out where they all fit in.

'It's a reward. The words are a reward.' Jackie told herself, 'The better I watch others, the further I write, the happier he'll be. Maybe he needs to see the world through my eyes. Does he have his own, or does he need one of mine?'

Admittedly, Jackie never got a proper sense of emotion from whoever was constantly following her. Not from her dreams, not from the brief hallucinations he'd reward her with, and absolutely not when he would idly watch her as she fret about all of this. She didn't even know if he could feel anything besides the interest he'd shown by following her and Isabelle. That the presence could understand human emotions may have just been wishful thinking on her part.

Jackie went on to look vacantly around her house. The isolation of living alone was invariably a double-edged sword. There was a harmony to having a routine that was never disturbed. Though, as the twilight came and the night grew, she used to feel an overpowering sense of apprehension as isolation would grip her imagination and suggest many dreadful hypotheticals of what 'could happen.' These fears were exacerbated by scary books or horror movies, Jackie would sometimes become anxious of whatever things that could lurk just outside the window, hide in a closet, or even lurk around any dark corner in her home.

Now, Jackie had comfort that replaced the unknown terrors. She now knew there was something out there. Something was watching her, and it didn't feel nearly as frightening as it should have. She'd grown used to it, and whatever was following her was on her side.

Jackie belonged.

Her eyes traced over the blinking light on her kitchen phone, showing three unplayed messages. She had heard both of them already when they first called and left their recordings. Her doctor was checking in and requested for Jackie to come in so they could conduct additional tests. Jackie wasn't eager to return that call, the last test was a biopsy that made the headaches worse. She didn't even bother to go back to review the results of the last procedure, and she certainly didn't want anymore of them. Another one was a courtesy callback from the college, reassuring her that they had cut her last paycheck and mailed it with an apology for the delay. She wasn't concerned with money. Jackie had enough money for the immediate future. Regardless, she wasn't confident she'd have the time to visit the bank anytime soon. She realized with each day she was becoming weaker, the discomforts worse. Jackie had to prioritize her limited time.

Jackie smiled proudly to herself as she flipped through some of the notebooks filled out by her hand. They were in no particular order, but despite that, she had a mental catalogue of each one and their exact contents. She knew all of them like the back of her hand except for the notebook she'd spotted that was left wide open beside the blinking phone. She glared at the pages and felt a chill run down her spine while she plucked it up to read. It was undoubtedly her handwriting, but as she read it, she initially failed to recognize the meaning of the words as it unnerved her to comprehend what was written.

I can feel you there watching me. Are you even real or a delusion? God help me if you're there, give me a sign, something irrefutable.

Hah. I knew it. I'm just losing my mind.

I'm going to call the specialist back and get my meds changed. Either that or I need to get committed. I don't even know why I suddenly care so much about everybody. Is it grief? Is that it? It isn't because my brain is being eaten away. I've looked into it, read the documentation. These are not the symptoms of what they diagnosed me with, not at all. I never cared about getting familiar with people anyways. Definitely not like this. Sure, it used to hurt to be alone all the time, but after I became an adult that was my decision. I could've done a thousand things to change my situation, but I was never in so much anguish that I needed to change it. I was happy, way happier than this. If this is the only friendship I'm capable of having, some monster in my head, then I would rather keep being alone.

Stalking people? What the hell was that? I almost broke into some poor girl's home. I still can't believe I stole her mail. I need to get it back to her somehow. There wasn't even anything worth taking anyway, just bills and ads. I am going to get arrested if I keep up this act. Maybe that's exactly what needs to happen...

I don't know who I'm even talking to...

Myself. That's who.

Because you're not even real.

Jackie, please read this. I realize I'm slipping a lot, but it's imperative that I call the specialist and explain everything that's going on, everything that's happened, and what I'm going to do. They won't harm me. They just want to make sure I'm comfortable and safe. If I keep getting bolder, then I might do something I can't take back. Please, future me, call the specialist back.

I don't even see why I'm leaving this up to future me. I'll call them right now and leave a message myself. Here's hoping they'll return my call by this afternoon.'

Jackie read and reread the letter over and over again. She realized there was no way that she wrote this. She concluded it must have been a test of some sort. In agreement with that theory, she felt the presence watch her with an intensity that he never had before. Her headache evaporated altogether, the nausea subsided and replaced itself with a healthy amount of hunger. Most notably, she felt a surge of energy and was more clear-headed than she had been in a long time.

She chuckled to herself. 'This notebook is useless. I don't even know what that was all about.' She said, reassuring herself of her grasp on reality. She tore the passage out of the notebook and flushed it down the toilet. There was no way that kind of talk had a place in her home or wasting her precious notebook space. She knew the presence approved that action, and she strode back to her room reinvigorated. There were a few details she neglected to write from the last time she went out.

Isabelle looked cheerful. She was with friends and talked about her parent's estrangement. The poor thing. I noticed some long strands of black hair on her top, and I wondered where that came from. She's blonde. Does she share clothes with her friends? I'll have to keep a closer eye on that.'

Interlude

Jackie wiped the drool from her lips then dry heaved several more times over the toilet bowl. Each lurch of her stomach forced every muscle to flex in an unstoppable spasm of agony. Tears flowed down her face as her body desperately struggled to force out exactly nothing from her empty stomach. Each ugly retch that forced its way through her lips resonated disgustingly in her throat with the familiar taste of stomach acid. The sound of her hacking reverberated inside her head worsening the migraine she'd struggled to fight against with pain killers. The entire experience was made worse by her already worn-out throat that had spent the last month bathing in stomach acid from previous nights just like this.

Jackie breathed heavily for several minutes until she was assured that this was the last of it. She weakly pulled herself upright, and her knees whined from the soreness of being used to hold her entire weight. Jackie flushed the toilet and stared disgusted at the swirling soup of blood and stomach acid that stared back at her. She closed the door behind her on her way to get back to work. Jackie drank a mouthful of water, which afforded a minor relief.

'At least I have something to puke next time.'

Jackie went through her bedroom to get to the living room, along the way making a deliberate effort not to let her eyes glimpse her reflection in the mirror mounted on her closet door. Jackie had developed a hatred for her reflection. Originally, that hatred was born of how it echoed her waning condition. It had evolved into a craving for an appearance that was radically different from herself, even when compared to her best. Looking at old pictures of herself filled Jackie with a sense of emptiness that she couldn't put into words. In the simplest of terms, to Jackie, she just looked wrong.

It wasn't just her appearance that irritated her; every other detail about her did as well. Every time she looked at her posture, her body language, the way she could hear her voice whenever she spoke. Like nails on a chalkboard inside her soul, Jackie was suffering from a dysphoria of her own existence. The suffering of which was only complemented by the physical symptoms of her decaying body. The only salve was the mimicry of everybody that she could remember. As her obsessive loathing of self increased, it would work her up into a

frenzy to be anybody else. Armed with notebooks to stir her memory, Jackie would imitate anyone that caught her eye as she read and reread line after line of her detailed observations.

Naturally, while imitating just anybody would have provided her a moment's reprieve from the haunting thoughts of who she was, the one that captured most of the spotlight was Isabelle. Jackie had heard many examples of dialogue from Isabelle in the course of everyday conversation. Besides that, Jackie'd grown especially keen on certain flourishes of body language Isabelle had displayed in moments of passion. Jackie had set out to practice from those examples diligently.

"Not much longer, Jackie. Hold out a little longer, and I'll get through this. There's enough time. I'm not so far gone yet. I can do what I need to." Jackie said to console herself. Of course, 'what I need to' was an allusion to the revelation of recent knowledge passed down to her through dreams. She was oh-so-close to figuring out the full message being sent to her, one cryptic message at a time. So far, she knew one thing with confidence.

'I'll be reborn into a new life.'

She recognized this to be true, and it had become a mantra to soothe herself during her lowest points. She'd decided experiencing her slow death was a rite of passage. If she succeeded without falling to despair, she would never have to look back on sickly shitty Jackie's life ever again.

'If I could be anybody, choose any life. Obviously, it would be Isabelle's. Then he'd have no reason to look her way ever again. I'll be everyone he wants.'

Jackie glared at her hand while it slowly balled into a loose fist and then relaxed. Even now, it filled her with rage that the means she'd need to set up her new life began with the suffering of having to see herself through her own eyes. She'd hoped the circumstances of her beginnings didn't tarnish the end result.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" Jackie responded with a cock of her head. She was standing in the living room now, trying her best to imitate Isabelle from memory. She expected that she'd soon get the energy to leave on another outing and pick up a video camera for future stakeouts.

"No, that's okay, I have to get going." Jackie said to nobody with a reassuring wave of the hand.

"It was nice to see you again. I'll text you when I get back home. I love you too, Dad!" Jackie said coldly. Jackie's lip trembled, a frown formed across her face. That wasn't how Isabelle said it at all. She'd have to try it again, with more emotion.

Jackie attempted to force the sentence out again. This time she spoke much softer, like a whisper, "I love you too... Dad."

She shook her head and closed her eyes to fight back the tears that had trickled down unexpectedly, Jackie didn't think she had any left.

"I love you...." Jackie said, trailing off.

The intrusive memories of her upbringing cut off Jackie's daydreams. She was born to the younger half of seven siblings. Far enough down the chain that it was a miracle her parents even remembered her name, let alone her existence. She grew up in a house where the eldest children were expected to care for the younger ones, and Jackie did all she could to avoid becoming a burden. To not stand out. She knew what happened to those who stood out, raised their hand, and made a peep. They would be the reason for everyone's bad day. It mattered little, though. After everything behind them, when Jackie grew up to succeed despite the odds, nobody cared. She'd quietly longed for anyone she knew to reach out to her once the dust had settled. Jackie knew she was nobody's favorite, and when it was time to face the real world, Jackie was just one less mouth to feed. One less concern of anyone.

"Nobody was even there when I got my masters. Someone should've been proud of me. I should've been proud of me."

Jackie snapped herself out of those memories with a groan of anguish and stormed off to the bedroom. She didn't want to be Jackie anymore. She didn't want to be Jacklyn Miller either. Jackie wanted to be anyone but 'that' thing that always looked back at her. She snatched the heaviest object she could get her hands on and threw it at the mirror. The initial impact sent dozens of glass shards to the ground, but Jackie could still make out her distorted reflection on what remained. She clawed the lingering fragments out from their place on the mirror until it was naught but the bare panel that lay beneath.

Jackie smiled in bliss at the destruction of the mirror. Never again would she have to distract her gaze as she passed through the room. She was finally safe from herself. In her exhilaration, she didn't notice the shards of glass that had embedded in her hands and fingers. They glinted against the dim lighting while blood dripped to the carpet below.

Duality

Jackie stood staring at the clock mounted on the wall of her living room. A negligible part of her was intensely mindful of each tick of the minute hand. She thought about the previous year, how far she'd come, and what she still had to do. She knew the entire song now and was eager to sing it. A melody that would bestow her another life.

She dreamed about her new life, what it would be like to be Isabelle. A sheepish smile flashed across Jackie's face while she became absorbed in a daydream. What it would be like to have friends who appreciated her and felt she was worth knowing. She couldn't talk about who Jackie was. Of course not. That would be a bridge way too far. They'd never understand, and hopefully, never believe her either if she felt so inclined to share. She'd be prepared to pursue a fresh career, maybe something with some real earning potential, something proper. Anything was better than teaching.

Jackie thought of having to reintroduce herself to her former colleagues around the campus with a different face. She blushed in embarrassment at what they would say if they'd ever found out what she had accomplished. Would she be able to resist the impulse to boast? She'd never been one to brag about her accomplishments. But she'd never done anything like this before. Nobody had.

'Maybe someone had... maybe I'm not the only one.' Jackie pondered.

Jackie looked down at her own body and grimaced. She had never hated herself as often as she did now. Her mind was clouded so regularly with the plethora of symptoms to the point she forgot what it was like to have a 'good day' anymore. To herself, Jackie felt and looked like a corpse walking among the living. This artificially alive thing. Were it not for the rebirth on the horizon, she'd have preferred to perish long ago.

She closed her eyes. The world swirled around her as she struggled to stay awake. She thought about her doctor, who had called and left several messages to check in on her. Jackie had missed several appointments, and because of the expected progression of symptoms, they doubtlessly believed she'd already died. If anybody had let themselves into her house, they would have immediately accepted that somebody had.

The bedroom floor was strewn with heaps of dirty laundry and crumpled trash. In the living room, hundreds of used pens and pencils lay where they were discarded. Mail had stacked up, as did newspapers and boxes. The lighting intensified each element of filth as it cast striking shadows against each corner of every wall.

A stench lingered in the air that Jackie had long since blocked out of untended trash and decomposing food. In the kitchen, many dishes were left in and around the sink. Mold happily grew wherever the dish breached the low pool of sink water.

Jackie slowly shuffled to the fridge. She needed to maintain her strength. She opened the refrigerator, and an utterly new level of filth met her nose. This rot was potent enough that even Jackie faintly noticed it, but she couldn't care enough to locate the source. Everything she ate made her sick, so she wouldn't expect anything could make it worse. Not that she could taste much anymore. She picked something out of the fridge, placed it on the top plate from the sink, and microwaved it.

While she nibbled her dinner, she peeked around the sticky notes lining the walls. After she had settled at home full time, many of these notes were the only things keeping her going. To Jackie, each note from one of her outings brought back a vivid memory of someone she'd observed. Someone she pretended to be. Moments rehearsed a hundred occasions. Most of these memories revolved around Isabelle, but many were about wholly different people who caught Jackie's eye. Very few were from herself and even less were about herself.

Those notes that were about herself were from a Jacklyn that was graced with fleeting flashes of lucidity and clarity. A part of her was keenly cognizant of how things were developing. She'd shifted dramatically and silently suffered every step of the way. These hasty scrawlings were a futile attempt for that version of herself to avoid what was going to take place.

"I don't want to hurt anybody."

"Can't stop myself. Never here long enough to do anything."

"Why can't I call the police?"

"There's another way out."

"I'll kill myself before I let this happen."

"Fuck the song. I'm a terrible singer."

That version of Jackie used to sabotage all of her attempts to stalk people. She would force herself to walk up to them to say a cordial 'Hello!' Sometimes she'd do something as innocent as dropping something loudly to draw attention to herself. Unfortunately, most people paid her only the most casual pleasantries before forgetting her entirely. It stung. She wasn't able to stop these delusions, the compulsions, the note-taking, and nobody would stop her. Not even herself.

Fortunately for Jackie, the part of her that kept doubting herself had almost entirely faded long ago, hardly even a passive passenger anymore. She recalled when she used to pray that somebody would stop her before things went too far. She knew help wasn't coming for her or Isabelle. Jackie accepted that neither of them needed it. They could help themselves.

"You're not strong enough to do this. You're dying and should be in hospice. Just pick up the phone, return their call."

Jackie shook her head to push the self-doubt aside. She was accomplishing what she had to. There was nothing else left to say.

"I'm okay with dying. I had a wonderful life. It was shorter than I expected, but it went much better than it could have. Better than it should have."

"No. No, this isn't the time to think like that. That kind of talk has no place here, I'm better than that now. Stronger than that. I can do this, I've been working my whole life for this."

"For this? What is this? Obsess, obsess, and obsess. There's nothing there, it's all delusions. I'm delusional, but I'm not going to kill anyone. That isn't who I am. I've never been that kind of person. I'm just scared again. It's normal to feel afraid, dying is scary. I can face this. Everyone has to someday."

"I'm not going to die. I don't have to. He said-"

"Who said? Nobody said anything. I never heard a voice, a name. So what? I had a few bad dreams, lived vicariously through some people, and now I'm going to kill them? Look at yourself, breaking a mirror and throwing away some pictures won't make you stop being you. Come on, think Jackie, think."

"I'm not Jackie! Stop calling me that!"

"Your name? Jackie. That's who we are. Who I am. Who you are. That's all we'll ever be. It'll never be anything else."

"No! I'm Isabelle. I am. I'm going to get better, I'm going to make different choices this time. I'm Isabelle. You can be Jackie, with all her disease, her failures, her misery. Be Jackie for every shitty second you'll have left. I told you, I'm Isabelle! And to everybody who's somebody, I can be Izzy too if I'd want! It's my life now. Nobody elses!"

"Jackie..."

Jackie continued to stand and stare vacantly at the clock for some time while her thoughts overwhelmed her. She snapped out of it and directed her attention to the phone. She quickly dialed a number from memory.

A male voice answered with a quick, 'Hello?'

'Hey,' Jackie responded sharply.

'Who is this?' the man asked, a polite yet wary impatience in his tone.

'Sorry,' Jackie replied with a cough. 'Dad? Can you hear me?'

He responded with confusion, "Is that you, princess? You sound different."

Jackie closed her eyes. 'Yeah, it's me. Sorry, I'm not feeling great. I'm at a friend's house. She let me use her phone.'

'I wondered about that. The caller ID said a name I'd never heard before. New friend from college?'

'Hmm,' Jackie murmured. The man took that noise to be agreement.

'Well, I'm glad you're making friends. I know college isn't an easy transition. For either of us. I miss you a lot. Miss your mom too.' He said with a forced laugh.

There was a lull, Jackie wasn't sure what to say.

'Yeah...'

The man immediately changed the subject. 'Well, if you need any money, let me know. Everything is more expensive these days, and I don't want you to worry about it. I always felt like I would've done a lot better in school if I didn't have to put food on the table.'

'You and me both,' Jackie said, a sinister tone catching her voice. Now it was Jackie's turn to shift the topic quickly. 'I'm fine on money. Dad. I've just been under a lot of stress. I keep

doubting myself, it's all so overwhelming. I don't know if I can do this... ' she said, trailing off.

'You've got a few weeks left of school, right? You've got this, you're so smart, and I've always told people how proud of you I am. Here, I know the house is emptier without your mother, but it will still always be your home. You should come back after class is over. Take a much-needed rest. You could visit her too, say hi for me.' He said.

Jackie could hear a grin in his voice.

'I'd like that.' Jackie said and noticed her emotions rising to the surface, 'I should let you go. I don't want to waste my friends minutes.'

'I should probably get going too. Remember, you can always call me. Anytime. I love you, Bella.'

'I love you too, Dad.' Jackie said and hung up the phone.

Jackie opened her eyes as silence occupied the air again. Her mind focused, her soul resolved. At that moment, she felt what it was like to be loved. She'd give anything.

Anything.

Just to feel that one more time.

Jackie took her medication, as much as she thought she could without overdosing. She changed her clothes to something much more presentable, packed her bag with supplies, and left the house without looking back. The setting sun struck her skin for the first time in months.

She knew that no matter what happened tonight, she wouldn't have to be known by anybody as 'Miss. Jacklyn Miller...'

...nor 'Jackie' to herself.