

The Perfect Picture

This is the moment I've been waiting for. Two beautiful deer stroll into the meadow I've been sitting in, the sun is setting behind them, casting a soft glow of orange light. I gleefully raise my camera to take a picture and... the battery dies. "NO!" I scream without thinking. The deer look straight at me, then sprint away, off into the sunset. I have no way to capture the beautiful sight, except by memory. I fall onto my back and stare at the sky. The clouds are bright pink, orange, and red. I know I should start heading home, but the scene is so mesmerizing. Plus, I know Ricardo and Milla will smother me with questions since I'll be late. I was hoping I'd be able to clear my mind by taking pictures, one of my favorite hobbies, but I didn't get many in before my battery died.

My eyes fly open to the sound of something hitting the floor followed by an "Ouch" from some unknown person. I can see a dark figure, and I panic; memories of the night my parents died come back to me. The light switch is only a few feet away from my bed, but the voice sounded close. I silently pull down my covers, roll out of bed, and crouch on the floor by my bedside table. I sense the body move towards my bed, and when a shadow leans over, I tackle their legs to the ground. They let out a cry and struggle to free themselves from under my weight, but I pin their legs to the floor. "Let go! It's me, Leo!" they whisper furiously. It takes me a moment to let go, then I quickly make my way to the light switch.

I flip the switch and see my 15-year-old platinum-blond cousin, Leo sprawled across the floor, "Sophie!" he whispers, sitting up.

"What are you doing here?!" I whisper back, "If Milla and Ricardo find out, we'll both be in deep trouble!" I lower my voice. Since my parents died, I have been living with my godparents, Milla and Ricardo Abreu, but they haven't let me see many people.

"That's why I was trying to be subtle!" he whispers more quietly. I look at my alarm clock; 1:27 am- also known as the middle of the night

"Again, what are you doing here?" I ask, irritated,

"Grayson and I are going down to the lake, we have a surprise for you." Grayson is Leo's 14-year-old step-brother who has been in the family since he was 7.

"And you wonder why Milla and Ricardo don't want me to hang around you... Fine. I'm coming with, but only to make sure no one drowns. How did you get in here?" I ask, and he points to my half-open window. I wait for him to explain because my room is on the second floor and there aren't any trees nearby.

"Look," he says, and I do. Grayson is on the ground below, and I wave when he sees me. There is also a ladder leaning against the house, under my window. "If you hold on to the windowsill, you can lower yourself to the ladder. Grayson will hold the bottom," he explains without any worry in his voice. "Ladies first," he says, bowing and I roll my eyes.

"Thanks," I retort sarcastically and grab a flashlight and hang my camera (with new batteries) across my shoulder before climbing out my window. "Make sure you turn off the light before you come down," I say to Leo. When I get to the bottom, I can see that they brought their bikes. I feel a little guilty leaving without permission, especially after all the worry I'd caused earlier with Ricardo and Milla, but not enough to turn back.

"You can ride with Grayson since his bike has back pegs," Leo says as he reaches the ground. I don't mind since my bike is in the garage, which makes a lot of noise when opened.

"Okay, let's go," I say, and we all mount up. I hold onto Grayson's shoulders as we ride down the street. "What do you guys want to do at the lake?" I ask him,

"I'm not sure what Leo has in mind," he answers. The moon, from behind the autumn trees, illuminates the clouds. We leave the bikes at the edge of the forest and jog down to the lake.

"It is 1:45, so we are a bit early, but we can talk until then..." Leo says looking at his watch.

"Until when? What are we waiting for?" I ask, and he smiles. When it is obvious Leo isn't going to answer, Grayson tries to start a conversation.

"So, how have you been, Sophie?" he asks, sitting down in the sand by the water.

"Adjusting, life is very different without my parents..." I reply with a sigh. "How are you guys?" I ask, sitting down next to him.

"We all miss you," he says looking up at Leo.

"I wish I could see you guys more often, but Ricardo and Milla won't let me. They say they know what is best for me, even if I don't. They don't even let me eat what I want!" I say, and Leo gasps.

"Not even chocolate milk?!" he asks, and I shake my head. "By what authority doest thou these things?" he demands in his best old English, and Grayson and I laugh. "I thought you looked a little slimmer," he continues, and I shove him in the back of his knees, forcing him to the ground with us.

"You're not funny. I'm going to a charter school now. It's different, but I've made a few friends... It's not the same without you guys."

"I still can't believe what happened..." Grayson mutters.

Trying to avoid the memories never works. We might as well get this part of the conversation over with, "I'm not afraid to talk about the incident. You can ask me about it if you want." I say looking across the lake.

"Neither of us know the whole story, what happened?" Leo asks, making eye contact with me. I take a deep breath and start my story.

"For my birthday, Mom and Dad took me to a photo gallery in Chicago. We spent the day there, looking around. That night, there was an incredible fireworks display at the Navy Pier. It was like nothing I had seen before. Later, we were driving home in the dark when a dark figure appeared in the street. My dad slowed down to let it cross, and I saw a man in a black hoodie turn and point a gun at the car. The first bullet hit the windshield and was lost in the car. The second hit Dad and the next thing I knew, the car was rolling.

"I woke up smelling something awful. The car was lying on its side, and I managed to crawl out. I tried getting my parents out, but I couldn't use my left arm. I realized the car had rolled down a hill, off the road, so I climbed back to the top. The man was gone, thankfully, but I didn't see any cars coming. I waited for at least twenty minutes before a car came. I waved them down, and an older lady got out and immediately called an ambulance. She took care of me while we waited. She followed the ambulance to the hospital and made sure I got help.

"I didn't get to see my parents. Instead, I had to have a CT scan and an x-ray. I broke my left collarbone and had a concussion, but you probably already knew that. I kept asking about my parents but no one would tell me anything. I didn't find out my parents were dead

until Milla and Ricardo came. The police questioned me the next day. They found the shooter from my description, and it turns out he was a drug dealer on the run. The Abreu's took me home with them, and I've been there since." I finish.

Leo and Grayson nod their heads "We are so sorry, Sophie! We really had no idea. We were still on our Washington DC trip and didn't find out about the crash until we got back. That's why we missed the funeral." Grayson explains.

"You should get out your camera, Sophie, it's 1:58," Leo says. I'd forgotten I had even brought it with until this moment. I turn it on and switch it to manual mode for taking pictures in the dark. The full moon is above the lake. I'm about to ask Leo what we are waiting for when light bursts over the lake.

"Why are there fireworks in the middle of October and at 2:00 in the morning?" Grayson shouts at Leo.

"I don't know, I just overheard some kids talking about it at school," Leo shouts back, over the loud explosions.

I am too busy capturing pictures to listen to them. A white one erupts and rains down in all directions, making me think of a weeping willow tree. It reminds me of the firework show my parents and I went to the night they died. The thrill of finally achieving a perfect picture washes over me. I relish the opportunity to capture an image that will keep me connected to my parents forever. I instantly forgive Leo for dragging us all the way out here in the middle of the night. Even though he's crazy, he is still one of my best friends. He and Grayson have always been like brothers to me, and I'm grateful for that. I know I will always have a family, despite the fact that my parents are gone. I know I can go on and that is enough for me. No matter what comes, I will always have my precious memories of my parents, even if they aren't the perfect picture.